

CHINESE

Character Writing

for
dummies[®]
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Practice your
way to writing

100

CHINESE CHARACTERS

with stroke-by-stroke
instructions and
plenty of space
to practice!

Dr. Wendy Abraham
Jing Li



Chinese Character Writing

by Dr. Wendy Abraham
and Jing Li

for
dummies
A Wiley Brand

Chinese Character Writing For Dummies®

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Introduction

Learning how to write Chinese takes patience, persistence, practice, and lots of hard work — all the qualities one needs for success in life, so why not start now?

The more you practice writing, the easier it will be for you to see the difference between 乒 (pīng) and 乓 (pāng), which, when put together, mean ping-pong: 乒乓. How cool is that? Or the characters for right 右 (yòu) and left 左 (zuǒ), which mean approximately, or thereabouts: 左右. And how about 大 (dà) and 太 (tài)? The first means big, and the second means too (as in too much, not also). These two don't go together to create a new word unless you switch them around and put the latter in front of the former: 太大, in which case you just wrote “too big.” Getting the hang of it?

About This Book

This book will guide your first steps in learning Chinese characters. It introduces you to 100 basic characters, almost half of which are pictographs and ideographs — the types of characters that look just like (or at least very similar to) the objects or concepts they indicate. In other words, the kind of characters people automatically think of when they think of Chinese. It helps you gradually familiarize yourself with the most frequently occurring parts of characters — pieces of the puzzle that provide clues as to its meaning or the way it sounds. Basic rules that govern the order in which each stroke of the writing brush must be written to create a single character are also introduced.

The characters introduced in this book are classified from the simplest to the most complex. Each of the 100 entries in [Chapter 4](#) includes the character's

- » Simplified form
- » Pinyin (transliterated pronunciation)
- » Meaning
- » Radical (key building block)

Another wonderful perk of this book is that in addition to teaching you how

to write Chinese, it also takes you on a brief journey through Chinese history, delving into the development of China's written language itself. You'll have all the things you need to know to be a well-rounded connoisseur of this ancient language.

Pay attention to a few conventions that can help you navigate this book's contents:

- » The Pinyin Romanization for a Chinese character is set in **boldface** and will usually appear right before the character (although sometimes it makes sense to show the character first).
- » Pronunciations and meanings appear in parentheses immediately after the Chinese terms. The English translations are in *italics*.

Foolish Assumptions

I wrote this book for anyone who's interested in learning how to write Chinese characters for whatever reason. No prior experience or fluency required!

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, I use the following icons to highlight certain types of valuable information that call for your attention.



REMEMBER This icon points out really important information that you won't want to forget.



TIP Look for this icon to point out a better or easier way to do something.



WARNING This icon alerts you to common mistakes and pitfalls to avoid.

Where to Go from Here

I recommend you read through the first few chapters before jumping into practicing the 100 characters, but if you're eager to get started, go for it!

The trick to learning how to write Chinese is (wait for it ...) to actually write Chinese. Every day. Even if it's just one character, write it over and over again during the week so that when the weekend rolls around you can write it almost instinctively, blindfolded.

Just like an athlete who trains by doing the same warmup exercises and athletic routines every day, developing muscle memory in the process, so too with writing Chinese. In order to master writing characters and increase the speed with which you do so, you must practice writing every day so that your writing hand begins to anticipate the direction the next stroke of the writing brush will take you in order to complete the character.

Chinese calligraphy (and Chinese writing in general) is as much a tactile art as football is a kinetic sport. There is a unique physicality in the mere act of writing Chinese that is both learned and intuited and, above all else, fulfilling. Calligraphers long ago discovered the almost meditative qualities of writing Chinese slowly and carefully with a calligraphy brush. (But more about that later.)

Chapter 1

Wrapping Your Mind around the Chinese Writing System

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Grasping the complexity of written Chinese
 - » Understanding the difference between traditional and simplified characters
 - » Getting excited and developing some strategies to help you learn to write in Chinese
-

The Chinese writing system is many things, but easy isn't one of them. It's unique, it's beautiful, and it's remarkable in its complexity. But just how does anyone attack a written language that doesn't even have an alphabet? And how do you know which way to write it or read it, if the characters can go from left to right, right to left, or up and down?

In this chapter, I give the lowdown on these age-old questions and more. I also give you tips on how to write and how to memorize at least the first 100 characters out of a language that has thousands of them.

Appreciating the Complexities of Written Chinese

Chinese has the distinction of being the mother tongue of the oldest continuous civilization on earth as well as the language spoken by the greatest number of people. It is also has arguably one of the most intricate written languages in the world, with about 50,000 characters in a typical Chinese dictionary — 28,000 of which are already obsolete.

So why keep obsolete words in a Chinese dictionary, you ask? Same reason we keep them in English dictionaries. They may no longer be used regularly,

if at all, but they do still exist. Haven't you ever felt crapulous? What? You've never been stuffed to the gills? Back in the 16th century, that Late Latin word meant just that. While we don't use that word anymore, it can still be found in any dictionary worth its salt. Those are the kinds of words you'll find in Chinese dictionaries too. This character, lì 栗 (pronounced "lee") variously meant *chestnut*, *trembling*, or *afraid*. That character with those original meanings is now obsolete, but one more stroke was added to the basic character, and the resulting character 俫 took over with a new meaning: ancestral tablet — a stone slab or piece of wood used by Chinese people to revere their ancestors.

To read a Chinese newspaper with relative ease, you only need to know about 3,000 to 4,000 characters. A well-educated person will be able to read between 4,000 and 6,000 characters and 40,000 to 60,000 words, each of which is comprised of one, two, or three characters. Armed with only 500 characters, you can recognize 75 percent of all Chinese words. And if you know 1,000 characters, you'll be able to read almost 90 percent of a newspaper.

Traditionally, only the wealthiest could afford the time and money to have their sons tutored in a written language so complex that it necessitated years of study to master. China has been a subsistence level society for centuries, and hunger and famine were real things not to be taken for granted. As a result, few people were literate in ancient China.

While Chinese characters are beautiful and filled with meaning in just one glance, with the sheer number of characters needed for even a rudimentary level of literacy, many could only see its impracticality and predicted its replacement by the more efficient alphabet. Thus began the creation of *Pinyin* (a form of transliteration which used Latin letters to reflect the pronunciation of Chinese words, such as our own in English), and the march toward language reform.

How the Written Word Unifies China

For thousands of years, spoken Chinese has been subdivided into hundreds of regional dialects, most of them mutually incomprehensible. Throughout the centuries, dynasty after dynasty, kingdom after kingdom, the one thing that united the Chinese people was the written word.

Even today, if two Chinese people are sitting next to each other on a train and one is from Beijing and speaks Mandarin, while the other is from the south and speaks Cantonese, and they read a newspaper out loud to each other they would have absolutely no idea what the other one is saying. However, if they look at the same characters and read silently next to each other, they will both understand the same thing. It is easier for them to write to each other than carry on an actual conversation.

In fact, spoken Chinese, with its many tones, leaves the door open for ever greater possibilities of meanings with any given word, including words that are not only pronounced the same but also spoken with the same tone. It is only by looking at the written word that the intended meaning and word become clear, if context alone is not enough.



REMEMBER Chinese people don't only speak one of the two dialects we typically associate with the spoken language: Mandarin and Cantonese. Hundreds of spoken dialects exist, representing every province, city, or town throughout the country, but Mandarin is the official dialect taught in all schools.



TECHNICAL STUFF This unification of the country through the written word came about during the Qin (pronounced “*chin*”) dynasty. It was during this dynasty that the tyrannical emperor Shi Huangdi had the famous terra cotta warriors made to accompany and protect him in the afterlife. He standardized many things during his short reign to further solidify his rule, foremost among them being the Chinese writing system. If he announced a new edict, everyone could read it.

What? No Alphabet?

Most of the world's languages are written alphabetically, with each letter representing only a sound, rather than containing any meaning. Chinese writing is *logographic*, however, so each character represents an entire word

or part of a compound word, necessitating thousands of characters. The word **diànnǎo** 电脑 (*dyan now*), for example, is composed of **diàn**, meaning *electric*, and **nǎo**, meaning *brain*. Put them together, and you have *electronic brain*, otherwise known as a computer. While this is fascinating and brilliant, the unabashed truth is that since there's no alphabet in Chinese, the only way to learn characters is the good old-fashioned way: study, study, study. Roll up your sleeves, put in the time, and memorize each and every one of them.

While learning Chinese characters sometimes feels like an insurmountable task, if you follow this book step-by-step and get to know the radicals and other components that comprise the characters, your study of Chinese will become much, much easier in no time.

Which Way Did They Go? The Direction of Characters

Since each character in Chinese is in and of itself a word, or a part of a compound word (two characters that make a separate word when combined together), they can be written and read in almost any order — right to left, left to right, or top to bottom. Every which way except diagonal.

If you go to a Chinese movie, you may see several subtitles: one in English, going from left to right, one in Chinese, also going left to right, and suddenly another Chinese line going from right to left. You may go cross-eyed for a while trying to follow them both, but you'll get the hang of it soon enough. And if you *really* want a shock, you just might also see a further set of subtitles written vertically, projected onto a wall, so your eyes begin to feel like ping-pong balls. Then all bets are off.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Right to left and left to right are common enough, but why top to bottom, you may ask? Before the invention of paper (by the Chinese, I might add), around the 8th century BCE, Chinese was originally written on pieces of bamboo, which necessitated writing vertically in the same direction as the strips of bamboo.

You can also see the role of bamboo strips in the character for the word *volume* (as in the volume of a book): 冊 (冊) **cè** (tsuh). The simplified character consists of two bamboo strips connected by a piece of string, while the traditional character (in parentheses) looks like even more bamboo strips tied together by a string.

See whether you can tell what the following Taoist saying means, no matter which direction it's going. To help give you a head start, in parentheses I've written the definition of each individual character. From there you can string them together and take a stab at translating the whole saying. Here are the meanings of the four characters in the saying:

知 **zhī** (jir) (*to know*)

者 **zhě** (juh) (possessive article, as in "*the one who*")

不 **bù** (boo) (negative prefix, such as *no, not, or doesn't*)

言 **yán** (yeah-n) (classical Chinese word for *to speak*)

Okay, here's the saying in three different directions. See whether you can figure it out by the time it's written top to bottom.

Left to right: 知者不言, 言者不知 **zhī zhě bù yán**

Right to left: 知不者言, 言不者知 **yán zhě bù zhī**

Top to bottom:

知	zhī
者	zhě
不	bù
言,	yán
言	yán
者	zhě
不	bù
知.	zhī

Give up? It means, "*Those who know do not speak, and those who speak do not know*" — a saying attributed to the 6th century Taoist philosopher Laozi

老子. How's that for wisdom?

In modern times, the Western layout of words from left to right became the norm, and in 1955 the People's Republic of China (PRC) government mandated that the same thing be done for Chinese characters. Taiwan did the same for official documents beginning in 2004.



REMEMBER Chinese can be written from right to left, left to right, or top to bottom. Pretty much any which way except diagonally, which would make anyone dizzy just looking at it.

Chinese Language Reform

With an illiteracy rate estimated at 85 percent in 1949, when the Communists took over China, drastic measures were needed before the country could move forward — way before the current lightning speed of modernization and seemingly nanosecond economic boom with which China is associated today. The overarching goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) back in 1949 was to create a new political order along with a revolutionary transformation of traditional Chinese values and social structure. As a result, adult education now consisted of three essential elements: the development of practical skills, the promotion of ideological education, and the eradication of illiteracy.

The first step of language reform, therefore, was the simplification of Chinese characters, reducing their sheer number while simplifying the forms in which they were written. A new standardized dictionary was published in 1955, instantly eliminating over 1,000 characters. The following year a list of 355 simplified characters was published, and by 1964, out of the 8,000 most frequently used characters, over 2,000 were simplified. Western punctuation and a revised printing style, from vertical to horizontal, made it easier to add foreign words and phrases and prepare for the eventual takeover of Pinyin.

The simplification of Chinese characters has been seen as progress in China's drive toward modernization. China's literacy rate has shot up from 20 percent to between 80 and 90 percent — an incredible outcome in a relatively short span of time.

The Pinyin system officially replaced previous types of Romanization systems, and even though it has become standard in China, there is no longer serious consideration of abandoning Chinese characters altogether after all.

Traditional versus Simplified Characters

Whether you're planning on visiting Taiwan or doing business in the PRC, you need to know the difference between **fántǐ zì** 繁体字 (fahn-tee dzuh) (*traditional characters*) and **jiántǐ zì** 简体字 (jyan-tee dzuh) (*simplified characters*). Especially if you plan on exchanging business cards at some point.

Fántǐ zì haven't changed much since **kǎi shū** 楷书 (楷書) (kye shoo) (*standard script*) was first created around 200 CE. (You read more about this and other kinds of script in [Chapter 3](#).) Traditional characters are still used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and many overseas Chinese communities today, where learning them begins at an early age.

Jiántǐ zì are used solely in the People's Republic of China, Singapore, and Malaysia. When the PRC was established in 1949, the illiteracy rate among the general populace hovered around 85 percent — in large part because learning to write Chinese was so difficult and time consuming, and most of the populace were farmers who worked on the land from dawn to dusk.

The new Communist government decided to simplify the writing process primarily by reducing the number of strokes it took to create a specific character, but not all. [Table 1-1](#) below shows you some examples of the before (traditional characters) and after (simplified characters).

TABLE 1-1 Traditional and Simplified Chinese Characters

Traditional Character (# of Strokes)	Simplified Character (# of Strokes)	Romanization and Pronunciation	Meaning
見 (7 strokes)	见 (4 strokes)	jiàn (jyan)	to see
車 (6 strokes)	车 (4 strokes)	chē (chuh)	vehicle
聲 (17 strokes)	声 (7 strokes)	shēng (shuhng)	sound
國 (11 strokes)	国 (8 strokes)	guó (gwaw)	country



REMEMBER This book features simplified characters rather than traditional because they are used by the greatest number of people and comprise the writing system you will need to know if you go to mainland China.



WARNING Simplification of the Chinese writing system has all sorts of political overtones, so if you're planning on doing business in Taiwan, for example, make sure your business cards and other company materials are printed with *traditional* Chinese characters. Save the simplified characters for your next business trip to China, Singapore, or Malaysia.

The campaign to reform China's written language by the Communists began in 1956, when the National Commission for the Reform of Writing published a list of 1,700 simplified characters. In 1964, the same commission put out an expanded list, which included over 2,200 simplified characters.

The process of simplifying characters includes reducing the number of strokes in characters that were too complicated, replacing a number of words with their homophones, and getting rid of superfluous variants (since certain characters had several different forms).

Even though writing is easier after characters are simplified, the beauty of traditional characters is lost forever. (Some of us are still mourning it, although I have to admit, simplified characters really are quicker and easier to write. Not all calligraphers follow suit however.)

Why Learn to Write Chinese?

Now that you know a bit more about the history and complexity of the written Chinese language, perhaps you're starting to panic. You may be wondering what in the world possessed you (what would possess anyone, in fact) to try to tackle one of the toughest, if not *the* toughest, writing systems in the world. I mean, it's one thing to want to learn how to speak Mandarin.

Heck, everyone does these days, what with the lightning-speed economic boom and endless business opportunities that beckon. For that, we have *Chinese For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, and *Chinese Phrases For Dummies* (both also published by Wiley). Those two books take you right to the doorstep of your friends, neighbors, and business partners so that you can chat with them face to face or try to engage in business negotiations. (For the high-stakes stuff, you should still hire an interpreter, but at least you'll know what everyone's haggling about.)

If you truly want to glimpse the depth and beauty of Chinese history, culture, and even its ancient worldview, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better way than by looking to the written word. Literally. Take, for example, the character for *peace*: 和. It is created by combining a mouth (口) with a piece of grain (禾). What if I told you that, throughout the centuries, famines have plagued the people of the Middle Kingdom, and after almost every famine there was a revolt against the ruler by the starving masses? The connection between people's mouths being filled with food (grain) and a peaceful kingdom was not lost on China's emperors throughout the ages. Just look to the character, and you'll find the bigger picture.

It works in the reverse for English too. Characters shine an instant light on the definition of almost any word. For example, what the heck was the “bubonic plague” in the Middle Ages, and how did people get it? Just look up “bubonic plague” in a handy Chinese dictionary and you'll see the characters for rat (鼠) and illness (疫). The disease borne of rats — Ta Da-a-ah! Is this not a brilliant language?

You'll get to know Chinese people by speaking with them in Mandarin, that's for sure. But take a long look at the Chinese writing system, and you'll get to know their collective souls. Scary? Yes. Even daunting, perhaps? For sure.

Fear not, my friend. This book will get you well on your way.

Strategies for Learning to Write Chinese Characters

One of the goals of this book is to introduce some of the most tried-and-true strategies for learning to write Chinese. You also have lots of opportunities to

practice. All characters in this book are divided into “graphic components.” This is to remind you that an effective method for memorizing Chinese characters is to remember the combination of these basic components.

Even though there are thousands of characters, the number of components of which they are comprised is actually quite limited. For example, the character **nín** 您 (you [polite form used when speaking to those much older than yourself]) has three basic components, which appear variously at the top, on the bottom, or in this case on the left-hand side of the character: 亻, 尔, and 心. Memorizing these three components is easier than memorizing 11 individual strokes of the writing brush by which the character is ultimately written, so long as you know the strokes to begin with. The job of this book is to teach you what these components are. Your job is to learn them and practice using them. How’s that for a perfect division of labor?

So how exactly do you get from Point A to Point B when trying to master Chinese characters? Follow these basic rules.

Set goals

Before you even begin to practice writing the characters themselves, you need to get into the “Can do!” mindset. Following are some specific suggestions to set you up for success before you put pen (or writing brush) to paper:

- » Set aside 10 to 15 minutes every day for character practice.
- » Decide how many characters you want to learn by the end of each week, month, or day.
- » Etch in stone the time you’ve scheduled for character practice on the calendar.
- » Treat your character practice routine as if it’s a real work appointment and stick to it.
- » Listen to your gut. If you were dying to memorize all 100 characters by the end of the day but aren’t even on character 5 by noon, you’re probably setting unrealistic goals.
- » Aim for a minimum of five characters a week (one each workday).
- » Give yourself a big pat on the back at the end of each week just for setting

and reaching your goals — or getting close to it.

Write, review, rinse, repeat

Some of the best ways to learn Chinese characters are also the simplest, tried-and-true ways to learn the written form of any foreign language: practice, practice, practice. Below I give you some ideas, which are easy to follow. All you have to do is, well, follow them.

- » Write each new character five times.
- » Write each new radical five times.
- » Create index cards for each character as you learn them.
- » Write the actual character on one side of the index card, and the Pinyin with tone marks, along with the English translation, on the other.
- » Put the index cards in your pocketbook or briefcase, so that when there's a lull, like at the waiting room of your doctor's office or while you're in line at the bank, you'll be able to whip out the cards and use your time efficiently.

Cultivate your inner character whisperer

Remember the connection between hand-eye coordination? Well, learning Chinese characters takes that up a notch, to eye-brain-hand coordination. What you see when you look at a seemingly inscrutable character needs to be emblazoned in your brain and then magically materialize again by your hand. Following are some ways to do this:

- » Identify the part of the character that indicates its likely pronunciation and say it quietly to yourself.
- » Group together the index cards whose characters look similar. Then say each out loud and guess the common denominator in how each character is written, which would produce that same sound.

For example, the characters for horse, mother, and to scold, are respectively written 马, 妈, and 骂. When you say them out loud, you realize that they are all pronounced “ma,” except they are pronounced with different tones.

- » When you look closely, you will see that the character for horse (马)

appears in all three characters. The only difference is that two of the characters have additional strokes beyond the horse. The character for “mother” has additional strokes, which mean female, and the character for “to scold” has two mouths written above the horse (perfect for yelling at someone, no?). Sounds difficult, but the more you look, the more you see, and the more you see, the more you get it. Get it?

- » Say the sound of each character out loud or in a low voice as you write them.
- » Speak to that character as it speaks to you (sorry, getting carried away now).

Practice creative visualization

Take a good look at an index card with a character on it. Any character. Now take a look at the back of the index card to see what it means. Look at the character again and start to connect the meaning of the character with how the character actually looks. If it was the character for horse, for example, you might imagine a horse galloping forward at full speed.

Do this with the next character you learned, and then the next, and then the next.

Congratulations! You’ve just finished the first part of your journey to learn to write Chinese characters. How does it feel?

- ☐ **hǎo** 好 (how) (*good*)
- ☐ **bù hǎo** 不好 (boo how) (*bad [literally not good]*)

See? Your first two characters are ready for the index cards.

Chapter 2

Understanding the Structure of Chinese Characters

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding the difference between simple and composite characters
 - » Getting familiar with the Six Scripts
 - » Understanding radicals
 - » Looking at the ins and outs (and ups and downs) of strokes
-

In this chapter I show you the different parts of Chinese characters, which together make up the whole. I help you get a handle on what to look for first when you write a character, how to look words up in a Chinese dictionary, and how to write a character, stroke by beautiful stroke, in the correct order.

Simple versus Composite Characters

This is probably the simplest thing about characters that you'll learn. Simply put, Chinese characters can be divided into two broad categories:

- » Simple
- » Composite

Simple, no?

In a nutshell, simple characters are created with just a few strokes of the brush (or pen). The characters 人, 天, 大, 小, 上, 下, 木, and 火, for example, are all simple characters.

Composite characters, on the other hand, comprise the vast majority of the 40,000+ characters in existence, and are composed of two or three symmetrical parts, in a particular order. For example:

Upper and lower parts: 思

Left and right parts: 如

Inner and outer parts: 网

Upper, central, and lower parts: 莫

Left, central, and right parts: 树

Over time, the most frequently used component parts became *radicals*, or keys to either the meaning of the character or how to look up that character in a Chinese dictionary. There are 214 radicals. (More on radicals later in this chapter.)

As you learn all 100 characters in this workbook, you'll not only see how they become increasingly complex, but you'll also be able to identify the radicals that underpin them. The first character, **yī** 一 (ee), with only one stroke of the brush, is aptly named the number *one*. Composed of only one horizontal stroke, the radical for this character also happens to be the same as the character itself: 一.

The last character on the list is also the most complex of the 100: **xiǎng** (to think). The radical of this character, **xīn** 心 (sheen), means *heart*, and is composed of a whopping 13 strokes.

Little by little, you'll get the hang of it.

The Six Scripts

You already know that Chinese words are written in beautiful, sometimes symbolic, configurations called *characters*. But did you know that you can classify the characters in a variety of ways? Each of these thousands of characters falls into one of six particular groups, by which they are classified.

These groups were articulated by the 1st century lexicographer, **Xǔ Shèn** 许慎 (Shyew Shun), who wrote the **Shuōwén Jiězì** 说文解字, (Shwaw wun jyeh dzuh), which translates as *explaining symbols and understanding characters*.

This was one of the earliest Chinese dictionaries dating to the 2nd century and the first to analyze the structure of each character. Equally important, it was the first to use the principle of organization by sections of characters with

shared components, called radicals, known as **bùshǒu** 部首 (boo show) in Chinese, which translates as *section headers* in English.

Xǔ Shèn identified all Chinese characters as falling into six particular categories, which are actually six different ways in which Chinese characters reflect different meanings and sounds. These designations are known as the **Liù Shū** 六书 (lyo shoo) — the Six Scripts. Of the six, four were the most common: pictographs, simple ideographs, complex ideographs, and phonetic compounds (also known as logographs). Phonetic compounds account for over 90 percent of all characters and are formed by two separate elements, one hinting at the meaning and the other providing a clue as to its sound.

WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN?

How did such a unique and intricate written language that has been the one thing that united the Chinese people for thousands of years get started in the first place? It's impossible to say for sure, but stories abound about how the minister of the mythical Yellow Emperor, **Huáng Dì** 黃帝 (Hwahng Dee), upon seeing the prints of birds and animals in the sand, drew pictures of the objects connected to those shapes.

It wasn't until the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 BCE), that the earliest known characters appeared on oracle bones, carved onto tortoise shells and ox scapulae, used for divination purposes. These Chinese characters comprised the first of the Six Scripts — pictographs.

[Table 2-1](#) briefly summarizes the Six Scripts, and the following sections cover each one in more detail.

TABLE 2-1 The Six Scripts

Type of Character	Chinese Character	Pinyin and Pronunciation	Description
Pictographs	象形	xiàngxíng (shyahng-sheeng)	Simplified line drawings of concrete objects
Ideographs	表意 or 指事	biǎoyì or zhǐshì (byaow-ee or jir-shir)	Graphic representations of abstract ideas
Compound ideographs	会意	huìyì (hway-ee)	Literally <i>joined meaning</i> ; combination of two or more characters into a new compound character
Phonetic compounds	形声	xíngshēng (sheeng-shuhng)	Literally <i>form and sound</i> ; combination of a visual meaning element with a phonetic element
Derivative cognates	转注	zhuǎn zhù (jwahn joo)	Literally <i>reciprocal meaning</i> ; characters given a new written form to better reflect a changed pronunciation over time

Phonetic
loan
characters

假借

jiǎjiè (jyah-jyeh)

Characters used to represent a homophone unrelated in meaning to the new word they represent

Pictographs

The Chinese term for pictographs, **xiàngxíng** 象形 (shyahng sheeng), literally means *form imitation*, since this type of character originally represented the actual objects they depicted.

For example, the character for *sun*, **rì** (er) 日, was originally written as a circle, representing the shape of a sun, but with a dot in the middle. Why, you ask? Dig a little deeper, and you'll find that the first recorded sunspots appeared around 800 BCE in the *Book of Changes*, otherwise known in the “I Ching” (which would actually be written as “Yi Jing” in Pinyin, but that’s another story for another chapter). The Chinese, in fact, were the first to record sun spots.

Because pictographs are visual representations of the objects they depict, rather than their sounds, they are great for conveying the meanings of things best expressed as pictures. They are not so great for expressing increasingly complex and abstract concepts, such as “peace,” or “happiness,” much less more detailed parts of speech, such as verbs or prepositions.

Enter the ideograph.

Simple ideographs

The Chinese term for ideographs, **zhǐshì** 指事 (jir shir), means *to indicate something*.

While pictographs represent pictures (“picto” = “picture”), ideographs represent abstract ideas (“ideo” = “idea”) rather than concrete images. Following are some examples of ideographs:

shàng 上 (shahng) (*up*)

xià 下 (shyah) (*down*)

sān 三 (sahn) (*three*)

The characters for “up” and “down” are representations of the horizon (the horizontal line), combined with either a vertical line going up above the horizon (meaning “up”), or a vertical line going down below the horizon

(meaning “down”). Characters for one (one horizontal line), two (two horizontal lines, one underneath the other), or three (the three horizontal lines depicted above) designate the abstract notions of numbers.

Compound ideographs

The Chinese term for compound ideographs, **huìyì** 会意 (hway ee), roughly translates into *joint meaning*.

This type of character combines two simpler characters that, when appearing together, produce one singular meaning representing a new idea. For example, the character meaning *good*, **hǎo** 好 (how), is a combination of **nǚ** 女 (nyew), meaning *female*, and **zǐ** 子 (dzuh), meaning *son*. Why should these two separate characters, when combined, represent the concept “good”? Because in the ancient Chinese conception of the world, it is always good for a woman to have a son.

By combining the characters for sun (日) and moon **yuè** (月) (yweh), you get the character **míng** 明 (meeng), meaning *bright*. The meaning of these characters is a function of the meanings of its parts.

Phonetic compounds

The Chinese term for phonetic compounds, **xíngshēng** 形声 (sheeng shung), translates literally as *shape and sound*.



REMEMBER Despite the popular conception of Chinese being a primarily pictographic or ideographic language, the vast majority of Chinese characters (about 95% of the characters in the *Shuowen Jiezi*, in fact) are actually “phonetic compounds” — characters that have one component that signifies a broader category of meaning and another component indicating its probable sound.

For example, the character for *candle*, **zhù** 炷 (joo), was originally a pictograph 主 (a character that is now pronounced **zhǔ** and means *host*) on the right, and the character **huǒ** 火 (hwaw) (*fire*) on the left, meaning that it is something related to fire.

Characters that have something to do with the mouth will invariably have as one component the pictograph for *mouth*, **kǒu** 口 (ko), such as:

hē 喝 (huh) (*to drink*)

chī 吃 (chir) (*to eat*)

tǔ 吐 (too) (*to spit*)

Another example of a phonetic compound is the character **gū** 咕 (goo). It's a combination of the radical **chóng** 虫 (choong) (*insect*) and the sound element of the character **gū** 古 (goo) (*ancient*). Put them together, and you have the character 咕, meaning *cricket* (the insect, not the sport). It's pronounced with a first tone (**gū**) rather than a third tone (**gǔ**). So the sound of the word is similar to the term for ancient, even though that term has nothing to do with the meaning of the word. The actual meaning is connected to the radical referring to insects.

The last two scripts do not produce new written forms. Instead, they transfer new meanings to existing forms.

Reciprocal characters

The Chinese term for reciprocal characters, **zhuǎn zhù** 转注 (jwan joo), can most easily be translated as *characters that turn to each other or explain each other*. The only thing to say about this particular category is that it just represents a way of using existing characters, so they retain their same form.

This is actually the smallest category among the Six Scripts, as well as the least understood. It is also the only one on which Xuǎn Shèn did not elaborate, so neither shall I. Why confuse us all even more?

Phonetic loan characters

The Chinese term for phonetic loan characters, **jiǎjiè** 假借 (jyah jyeh), roughly translates as *accidentally, or falsely, borrowed characters*.

As with reciprocal characters, characters falling under this category are just another way of using characters that already exist.

They can even be the ancient equivalent of a “typo,” which leads to accidentally replacing the original character with other characters just for the similar pronunciation. In other words, they are homophones, words that sound alike but are spelled differently or have different meanings altogether.

What a Radical Idea! The Incredible Radical

This section is all about radicals — those poor, misunderstood second cousins of Chinese characters that always get a bad rap. Just kidding. *Radicals* are the building blocks of all characters, so they're beloved and respected by all the other parts of the character they inhabit.

The Chinese written language contains a total of 214 radicals — parts of the character that can help identify what it may signify. For example, if you see two or three dots on the left-hand side of the character, you know the word is something connected to water. Following are some characters with the water radical appearing on the left-hand side:

冰 **bīng** (beeng) (*ice*)

冲 **chōng** (choong) (*to pour boiling water on something/to rinse or flush*)

汗 **hàn** (hahn) (*sweat*)

河 **hé** (huh) (*river*)

湖 **hú** (hoo) (*lake*)

Another example: The radical meaning *wood* — 木 **mù** (moo) — originally represented the shape of a tree with branches and roots. Here are some characters with the wood radical in them (also on the left-hand side):

板 **bǎn** (bahn) (*board/plank*)

林 **lín** (leen) (*forest*)

树 (樹) **shù** (shoo) (*tree*)

Sometimes the radical can be found at the top of the character rather than on the left-hand side. The radical meaning *rain* — 雨 **yǔ** (yew) — is one such character. Look for the rain radical at the top of these characters. (Hint: It looks slightly squished compared to the actual character for rain by itself.)

雹 **báo** (baow) (*hail*)

雷 **léi** (lay) (*thunder*)

露 **lù** (loo) (*dew*)

One of the most complicated radicals (number 214, to be precise) is the one that means *nose*: 鼻 **bí** (bee). It's so complicated to write, in fact, that only one other character in the whole Chinese language uses it: 鼾 **hān** (hahn) (*to snore*).

Why all the fuss about radicals?

If radicals are so limited, how come everyone seems to talk about them and use them for teaching Chinese? Part of the reason is that many haven't understood the difference between radicals and character components in general, which is evident when you hear someone say, "This character contains two radicals, 木 and 目." No character contains two radicals; that would defy the purpose of radicals!

Each of the 100 characters you will practice writing in [Chapter 4](#) has its very own radical noted clearly on the same page. This way, you can compare the radical to the character as a whole and begin to see the connections for yourself. (Lucky you!)



REMEMBER *Character components*, on the other hand, are very important to understand how characters are structured, but the radicals themselves aren't useful unless you want to look up characters in old dictionaries. Thus, pay attention to components and what function they have.



TIP

Check out the Radical Chart in Appendix [A](#).

How to use a Chinese dictionary ... without an alphabet

To truly understand what radicals are and how they work, all you need to do is look at how Chinese dictionaries are structured. Traditionally, Chinese dictionaries aren't sorted alphabetically, but instead use what's called **bùshǒu** 部首 (boo show) in Chinese, meaning *section head*. For some reason, this is translated as "radical" in English.

Each Chinese character has one and only one radical, which dictionaries use to sort the character into the right section. Not all characters are sorted by exactly the same radical in all dictionaries, but most are. Within each section, characters are sorted by the number of additional strokes necessary to write the character, not including the radical.

So, a radical is a part of a character that happens to have a special function used in dictionaries. It's not the same as a character component, and it's not even the same thing as a semantic character component. As far as dictionaries are concerned, radicals are the part of a certain character that is used to index it — nothing more, nothing less. This means that a certain character component, say **tǔ** 土 (too) (*earth*), can be the radical in some characters like **jìng** 境 (jeeng) (*situation*), but not in others such as **dù** 肚 (doo) (*stomach*). What kind of information do you think 土 carries in 肚?

Radicals make it possible for you to identify the basic meaning of a character by looking at the key portion of it — the radical. But because Chinese has no **zìmǔ** 字母 (dzuh-moo) (*alphabet*), there are all sorts of ways to look words up in a Chinese dictionary.

Whether you're looking at simplified or traditional characters (see [Chapter 1](#)), you don't find any letters stringing them together like you see in English. So how in the world do Chinese people consult a Chinese dictionary? Just follow these “simple” steps:

1. **Count the number of strokes in the overall character.**

Because Chinese characters are composed of several strokes of the writing brush, one way to look up a character is by counting the number of strokes and then looking up the character under the portion of the dictionary that notes characters by strokes. But to do so, you have to know which radical to check under first.

2. **Determine the radical.**

Each radical is itself composed of a certain number of strokes, so you have to first look up the radical by the number of strokes it contains.

The second step in this part of the process of looking up characters according to their radical is to then check the section of the dictionary that comes immediately after the list of radicals, this time locating the number of the radical first.

3. Check under the pronunciation of the character.

You can always just check under the pronunciation of the character (assuming you already know how to pronounce it), but you have to sift through every single homonym (characters with the same pronunciation) to locate just the right one. You also have to look under the various tones to see which pronunciation comes with the first, second, third, or fourth tone you want to locate. And because Chinese has so many homonyms, this task isn't as easy as it may sound (no pun intended).



TIP

I'm happy to tell you that there are actually a ton of online Chinese-English dictionaries in this day and age, so you don't have to go through each of these steps.

On the other hand, by practicing the various ways to look up characters in printed dictionaries gives you a much richer, deeper understanding of the beauty and intricacy of Chinese characters. It also gives you a new appreciation for just how difficult it must be for students in China to learn their own language and attempt to memorize not just 214 radicals but also many of the 40,000-plus characters in existence.

Deciphering Strokes

Simply put, *strokes* are marks made with one continuous motion of the writing brush (or pen) that, when combined with other strokes (if the character is not just comprised of one stroke to begin with), create a complete Chinese character.

All strokes fall into one of three categories: dots, lines, and hooks.

In this section, I show you the most important thing you will have to know in order to actually write a real, live Chinese character. I tell you about the kinds of brush strokes that exist and combine to create an individual character, and in what order those strokes must be written. And that's no mean feat.

Types of strokes

In order to determine the number of strokes of a given character, it is essential

to know what counts as one stroke. [Table 2-2](#) shows the eight basic strokes used to create all characters, along with the directions in which they should be written.

TABLE 2-2 The Eight Basic Strokes of Chinese Characters

Stroke Number	Name	Traits
1	Dot	丶
2	Horizontal	一
3	Vertical	丨
4	Descending to the left	㇏
5	Descending to the right	㇚
6	Rising	㇚
7	Horizontal Hook	乚
8	Vertical Hook	亅

Diǎn 点 (dyan) is a dot, written with pressure on the brush from the top, then getting lighter at the bottom.

Héng 横 (hung) is a horizontal stroke going from left to right.

Shù 竖 (shue) is a stroke falling straight down vertically. The brush begins with a dot on top before falling downward.

Piě 撇 (pyeh) falls left, with a slight curve.

Nà 捺 (nah) falls right, with an emphasis at the end.

Tí 提 (tea) is a flick up and right.

Héng gōu 横钩 (hung go) ends another stroke by creating a sharp change of direction either down (after a **héng**) or left (after a **shù**).

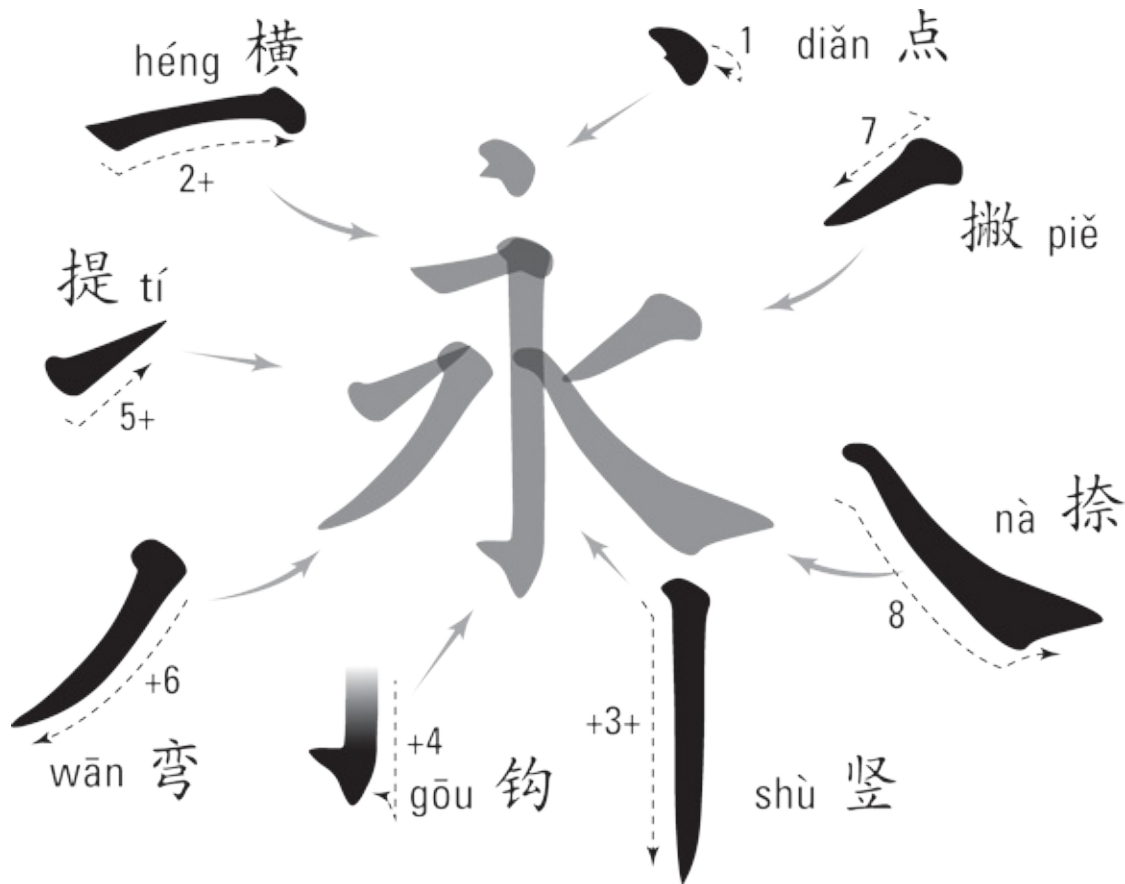
Shù gōu 竖钩 (shoo go) cuts a concave path on the left or on the right.



TIP

One of the most important characters to practice when learning to write Chinese calligraphy is the character **yǒng** 永, meaning *forever*.

What makes this character unique is that you can find all eight basic strokes in it.



Nowadays you don't have to master the art of Chinese calligraphy to write beautiful characters. All you need is pen and paper. Those who prefer a challenge, an opportunity to practice an ancient art, and meditation all at once, would do well to practice calligraphy the old-fashioned way — with a traditional Chinese writing brush, using ink ground in an ink stone, on rice paper. (For more on calligraphy, see [Chapter 3](#).)

Stroke order

If you want to study **shū fǎ** 书法 (shoo-fah) (*calligraphy*) with a traditional Chinese **máo bǐ** 毛笔 (maow-bee) (*writing brush*), or even just learn how to write Chinese characters with a plain old ballpoint pen, you need to know which stroke goes before the next. This progression is known as **bǐ shùn** 笔顺 (bee shwun) (*stroke order*).

Without further ado, here they are:

- » **Rule 1: Top to bottom.** That's it. (Just kidding.) The first rule of thumb is that you write the character by starting with the stroke that's the highest one in the whole character.

For example, the number one is written with a single horizontal line: 一. Since this character is pretty easy and has only one stroke, it's written from left to right, without any concern about which stroke appears on top. It's completely self-sufficient and stands alone.

The character for *two*, however, is composed of two strokes: 二. Like the number one, these strokes are also written from left to right, but the top stroke is written first, following the top-to-bottom rule. The character for *three* has three strokes (三) and follows the same stroke-making pattern.

For more complicated characters, such as **léi** 雷 (lay) (*thunder*), you must write the radical that appears on top (雨) first before writing the rest of the character underneath it.

- » **Rule 2: Write horizontal strokes before vertical strokes.** For example, the character meaning *ten* (十) is composed of two strokes, but the first one you write is the one appearing horizontally: 一. The vertical stroke downward is written after that.

- » **Rule 3: Write strokes that have to pass through the rest of the character last.** Vertical strokes that pass through many other strokes are written after the strokes they pass through (like in the second character for the city of **Tiānjīn**: 天津 [tyan-jeen]), and horizontal strokes that pass through all sorts of other strokes are written last (like in the character meaning *boat*: 舟 **zhōu** [joe]).

- » **Rule 4: Create diagonal strokes that go from right to left before writing the diagonal strokes that go from left to right.** You write the character meaning *culture* — 文 **wén** (wuhn) — with four separate strokes: First comes the dot on top, then the horizontal line underneath it, then the diagonal stroke that goes from right to left, and finally the diagonal stroke that goes from left to right.

- » **Rule 5: In characters that are vertically symmetrical, create the center components before those on the left or the right.** Then write the portion of the character appearing on the left before the one appearing on the right. An example of such a character is the one meaning *to take charge of*: 承 **chéng** (chuhng).

- » **Rule 6: Write the portion of the character that's an outside enclosure before the inside portion.** For example, the word for *sun*: 日 rì (ir). Some characters with such enclosures don't have bottom portions, such as with the character for *moon*: 月 yuè (yweh).
- » **Rule 7: Make the left vertical stroke of an enclosure first.** For example, in the word meaning *mouth* — 口 kǒu (ko) — you write the vertical stroke on the left first, followed by the horizontal line on top and the vertical stroke on the right (those two are written as one stroke) and finally the horizontal line on the bottom.
- » **Rule 8: Bottom enclosing components usually come last.** For example, the character meaning *the way*: 道 dào (daow).
- » **Rule 9: Dots come last.** For example, in the character meaning *jade* — 玉 yù (yew) — the little dot you see between the bottom and middle horizontal lines is written last.

Chapter 3

Preparing to Write Beautifully

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding the development of ancient Chinese characters
 - » Appreciating the art of Chinese calligraphy
 - » Getting excited about the many styles of Chinese script
-

While online Chinese dictionaries and writing apps abound, nothing can take the place of a beautifully composed handwritten letter, or a work of art filled with nothing but Chinese characters — otherwise known as a piece of *calligraphy*. These are things that may take years to master, and with good reason. They both require — and help cultivate — the lost arts of patience, perseverance, discernment, and practice.

There was a time in the not-so-distant past when all Chinese students were required to practice calligraphy for hours each day. And there was a time in the very distant past when writing Chinese meant finding a really strong chisel, determining what Heaven or the emperor wanted recorded, and then meticulously and laboriously carving characters into an oracle bone, a tortoise shell, or a ritual bronze vessel.

Today, some things have changed. Chiseling onto an oracle bone is no longer necessary, and students of Chinese can just click on the latest app and have it instantly produce characters **for** them, without ever picking up a writing brush or learning how to write characters themselves. A good Chinese language teacher will wean students away from the latest technology, so that they can begin the difficult but eminently fulfilling task of learning which strokes comprise any given character, writing them carefully in a predetermined order, and making sure each part of the character is symmetrical.

There's just no way around it, whether the character is comprised of one stroke or 16, the method of writing and memorizing characters remains the same as it did eons ago: practice, practice, and practice again. And in between

all the practicing, take a moment to be awestruck at your creations. You are now part of the latest generation of students who have learned the Chinese written word. The practice of learning to write Chinese characters, whether for a letter or a work of art, still harkens back to an ancient time.

In this chapter, I walk you through a brief history of Chinese writing styles and writing implements. Then, the focus turns to your upcoming practice — what supplies you need, proper techniques, and more.

From Then to Now: A Brief History of Chinese Writing

This section takes a quick stroll down China's written memory lane, by focusing on how all of those thousands of characters were written. Literally. How did they get from the brain to the hand to whatever they were written on or carved into? What kind of writing tools were used, how were they crafted, and what part did they play in how the style of Chinese script evolved through the centuries?

Carving on bone

The earliest known Chinese characters were found on bones which were unexpectedly dug up in the 1800s by farmers in the little village of Xiaotun, in the city of Anyang, Henan Province, about 300 miles south of Beijing. Finding unusual markings on them, the farmers were convinced they were dragon bones and began to sell them to apothecaries, who in turn sold them to the public as having medicinal qualities.

It wasn't until 1899, after thousands of these bones had been ingested by the unsuspecting public, that the director of the Chinese Imperial Academy, Wang Yirong, bought what he, too, thought was medicine. He put them into a broth and then suddenly noticed writing on them. Alternating between horror, fascination, exhilaration, and then horror again, he quickly realized he was looking at — and about to eat — glyphs that were older than bronze vessels dating to the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE), which were until then thought to be the oldest form of Chinese writing.

The glyphs on the characters were soon called **Jiǎgǔ wén** 甲骨文 (jyah goo one) (*shell and bone script*) because they were carved into tortoise shells and

ox scapulae, and they were determined to date back to China's first archaeologically verifiable dynasty, the Shang (1766-1122 BCE).

Since bone and shell are quite durable, it's totally possible that characters were developed even earlier than the Shang dynasty, if they were written on material that was less sturdy than bones and shells and as a result did not survive.

Excavations in the village of Banpo, just east of the city of Xi'an, to which tourists have been flocking for decades because of the famed terra cotta warriors that are there, turned up pottery with etchings on them dating to the Neolithic era. Scholars and archaeologists believe these may have been the predecessors of the characters found on oracle bones. If so, Chinese writing could very well have been invented even thousands of years earlier than the Shang Dynasty.

Since hard, bony surfaces like bone and shell made angular characters easier to carve than rounded ones, the angular feature of ancient characters was something that also appeared in Chinese writing down through the centuries.

From etchings to brush and ink

During the Shang dynasty, brush and ink were also used to write characters, as found on some pottery, shell, bone, and jade dating back that far. There is even evidence that writing was done with a brush on bamboo back then, since the character for writing brush, 聿 **yù** (yew), which depicts a hand holding a writing brush, already appears early on in the two dynasties which followed: the Zhou (pronounced Joe) (1122–221 BCE) and the Han (206 BCE–220 CE). In fact, the Chinese character for “book” is: 冊 **cè** (tsuh), depicting thin vertical bamboo strips with a horizontal string connecting them. This was already present on oracle bones, although books created during ancient times had two horizontal strings connecting each slat of bamboo.

Adding bronze carvings to the mix

Toward the end of the Shang dynasty, characters were next carved onto bronze, and Chinese writing evolved into the form found on ritual bronze vessels used for sacrificing to Heaven, as well as on ritual bells, and signature seals, all dating to the Western Zhou (ca. 1066–770 BCE) and the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE), when Confucius lived. This writing was called **Jīn wén** 金文 (jeen one)

(*metal script*). The shape of **Jīn wén** characters was similar to oracle bone script of the Shang dynasty, but less angular because it was easier to write in the wet clay of the molds they used to cast bronzes. This also meant that characters could be thicker and more structured, since scribes were no longer at the mercy of a single sharp implement as they tried to etch characters into the difficult surfaces of bone and shell.

While the vast majority of **Jīn wén** characters were chiseled with a stylus, some were actually written with a brush dipped in ink made of cinnabar.

Widespread use of brush and ink

Characters written on oracle bones were fairly uniform, given the difficulty of etching them onto the particular surfaces they were working with in the first place. It wasn't until the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that more stylized characters emerged, in no small measure due to the invention of paper, a gift the Chinese shared with the rest of the world. By the third century CE, paper was already used for making books. Since paper was made of readily available materials, such as raw hemp and tree bark, it was inexpensive to produce.

By then the four key materials used by calligraphers down to this day were invented: the writing brush, ink, ink stone, and paper. It was during the Han dynasty that brush use became widespread. The flexibility of writing brushes allowed later calligraphers to express themselves in styles that were in turns dramatic, subdued, and everything in between, representing their inner creativity.

Moveable type and word processing

Later methods of writing evolved from engravings on stones and metals in ancient times, to ink rubbings from stone reliefs, woodblock printing, and movable type in later dynasties. The invention of movable type during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) greatly facilitated the government's ability to issue proclamations, and the writer's ability to produce works of philosophy, history, and literature — but only for that part of the populace who could read and write.

And now, of course, the Chinese, like everyone else, can make characters instantly appear on a computer screen with a click of the mouse, just like the Americans who began this chapter. If you ask me, they're both missing out on

perfecting the lost art of putting pen (or brush) to paper, intentionally and lovingly tracing each stroke of every character in a particular order, to create their own work of art, even if it's only in the form of a grocery list.

The Evolution of Chinese Script

As discussed in the previous section, Chinese writing began some 3,500 years ago. Over the centuries, the style of Chinese characters changed, ultimately producing seven styles of script, each with their distinct look and newfound purpose for the people who wrote in those styles. Following are the main forms of Chinese script down through the ages:

- » Oracle bone script (**Jiǎgǔ wén** 甲骨文 [jyah-goo one])
- » Bronze inscriptions (**Jīn wén** 金文 [jeen one])
- » Seal script (**Zhuàn shū** 篆书 [juahn shoe])
- » Clerical script (**Lì shū** 隸书 [lee shoe])
- » Running script (semi-cursive) (**Xíng shū** 行书 [sheeng shoe])
- » Grass script (fully cursive) (**Cǎo shū** 草书 [tsaow shoe])
- » Regular script (**Kǎi shū** 楷书 [kye shoe])

The names of these scripts were often connected to the material on which they were written or the function they served. **Oracle bones**, for example, was written on tortoise shells and ox scapulae. Bronze inscriptions were written on ritual bronze vessels, seal script was used by government functionaries who had to put official stamps on documents with seals, and so on. The development of each of these scripts made writing Chinese increasingly easier and better suited to the different materials on which to write — and with greater opportunities for creativity.

[Figure 3-1](#) shows how the word *dragon* changed from Oracle bone script all the way to Regular script.



FIGURE 3-1: “Dragon” looks quite different now compared to how it appeared on an Oracle bone.

The following section covers each of these forms in a bit more detail.

Oracle bone script

Oracle bone script primarily depicted concrete objects. Since the scribe had to work with such hard surfaces as bone and shell, the characters etched onto them were of necessity angular — a design feature that was preserved in later brush writing.

Although it was fully functional as a writing system, Oracle bone script had never actually been standardized, so the size and even the direction of characters were irregular and unpredictable. Some portions of the same character were left out or written slightly differently, and others appeared upside down after appearing right side up, even though the meaning of those characters remained the same. It wasn't until the standardization of the Seal script later on in the Qin (pronounced chin) dynasty (221–206 BCE) that China's written language was standardized for the first time.

Bronze inscriptions

The Bronze Age in China began towards the end of the Shang Dynasty, around 2000 BCE, and continued through the Zhou (1045–256 BCE) — China's longest running dynasty. These new characters were called **Jīn wén**, meaning *metal characters*, because bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. Chinese characters were now cast onto ritual vessels that had even more advanced methods of bronze metallurgy. They used something called piece-mold casting, which consisted of creating a model of the object to be cast, taking a clay mold of the model, cutting the model into sections then releasing the model, and finally reassembling the sections after firing it to fit the mold for casting. Piece of cake, no?

I bet you're wondering what all this information is doing in a book about Chinese characters. Funny you should ask. What this method of casting bronze did was to allow characters and various designs to be carved directly onto the mold before it was fired.

While Oracle bone script is greatly simplified and angular, due to the nature and difficulty of engraving on hard surfaces, bronze inscriptions are more rounded because it was easier to write them in the wet clay of the molds from which they were cast.

Seal script

Seal script is the oldest style of Chinese character writing still used today. As the name implies, this type of character came about when private ownership of scrolls or books emerged, and a seal was needed to confirm exactly who owned it. These seals or stamps (also called chops) confirmed someone's ownership of a scroll, a book, or pretty much anything in between. Seals were also used in lieu of actual signatures on official documents. In fact, they can still serve the same purpose today.

Seal script characters are taller than they are wide, but the width is uniform — no doubt a holdover from having to carve on bones or bronze. As the writing brush came into common use, however, scribes and artists discovered that using a writing brush necessitated using too much pressure to create the kind of curved, even strokes which were the hallmark of Seal script, making it inordinately laborious and demanding.

THE VIOLENT HISTORY OF SEAL SCRIPT

Large Seal script was the first to come about, during the Zhou dynasty, and had many of the same characteristics of previous bronze inscriptions. Small Seal script, however, had a rather ignoble beginning.

The first Chinese emperor, Qin Shihuang (pronounced Chin Shir hwahng), conquered the Qi (pronounced chee) kingdom and united all the other kingdoms that remained — the first time in Chinese history that each of the warring kingdoms were unified. He named the newly united kingdom Qin (pronounced chin), after the name of his own kingdom. It is from the name of this first kingdom that the name China was created.

To prepare and perpetuate his power over this huge empire, Qin Shihuang decided to unify the many forms of writing then in use as well. He gave his palace minister, Zhao Yunshao (pronounced Jow Yewn shaow), himself a scholar of oracle bones and bronze inscriptions, the task of producing a style that could be more easily written and understood by all.

Drawing his inspiration from Large Seal script, Zhao Yunshao created a new, beautiful standardized script that he called "Small Seal" script. Success!

And with that, he promptly proceeded to bury alive all intellectuals who opposed the new script and the regime. He also burned all books that used any other form of writing, so that there would be nothing but Small Seal script for the people to ever see or emulate.

Clerical script

Clerical script — so named because of its use by government functionaries who wrote official documents — is universally seen as the first major step in

the standardization of written Chinese, and the moment when modern Chinese characters began to take shape. Unlike the feudal states of the Zhou dynasty, when Seal script was predominant, the centralized Qin dynasty had an urgent need for official record keeping to deal with the growing bureaucratic complexity. As a result, the new dynasty required a new and more efficient writing style. It may even have been government clerks themselves who devised this new script, since they were the ones whose jobs were on the line.

Compared to Seal script, Clerical script is flatter, wider, and more linear, with straight lines and square corners. It is this linearization that made Clerical script characters significantly more abstract and faster to write. In fact, Clerical script is actually an abbreviated form of Seal script — one that makes writing easier, quicker, and more efficient. It allowed for a much freer style.

Running script

Running script, a semi-cursive writing style which appeared shortly after the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), was one of the most dramatic script styles, with characters and strokes which seem to flow together seamlessly, unlike the clearly delineated strokes of the Seal and Clerical script styles. It was so easy to write that its use became widespread, and it is still used as a freehand form of writing today. Characters appeared rounder, and rarely did the writing brush leave the page when a word was composed.

Grass script

If ever there was a more creative style of calligraphy than the Grass script, you would be hard-pressed to find it. It is the equivalent of abstract art in the West. When characters evolved from the semi-cursive running script to the fully cursive Grass script, in an instant they became almost completely unrecognizable.

Strokes are merged, entire parts of characters are missing, strokes replaced four dots, and the stroke style is modified. The ability to use brush and ink for the heights of creativity had risen to the highest level ever. Rules no longer applied because they no longer existed. With the Grass script, it was the calligrapher who determined how he wanted to best represent thoughts, feelings, or just a passing mood. It was complete freedom, and it showed.

The flip side of all this freedom was that calligraphy in the Grass script style is often illegible. As a result, its main purpose is decorative. Although the idea of such an abstract style would appear to be a modern development in the long history of Chinese calligraphy, it actually first appeared between the end of the Qin dynasty and the beginning of the Han, around 200 CE.

Regular script

Regular script is the one you will see most often in print and in calligraphy these days. It's the easiest script to both recognize and write, probably because it's the clearest. When you look at it, each character seems symmetrical, crisp.

Most of the time we think of “cursive” type scripts, such as Running script and Grass script, as coming after something more geometric looking and evenly spaced as Regular script, but as it turns out, it's just the opposite. Unlike Running script, every stroke is clearly separated from every other stroke, the strokes are symmetrical, and it looks very balanced compared to the other scripts. It is a simpler script than all the others and easier to read. This is the script used in textbooks to this day. The style of Regular script is the antithesis of the rather complicated Clerical style, and the often-indistinguishable Grass style script, even though they all emerged during the Han dynasty. Regular script was much more stylized and efficient.

Clerical script was suddenly too elaborate for the writing needs of a newly emerging world of commerce. An imperial decree by the last emperor of the Han dynasty, Liu Xie (pronounced lyo shyeh), was given, which made it a requirement for everyone to use the new Regular script, whose Chinese name, **Kǎi shū** 楷书, translates into *the model of writing to be imitated*. It was during Liu Xie's reign that the eight basic kinds of strokes and the order in which they were to be written (see [Chapter 2](#)) were also identified and established.



REMEMBER Each successive writing style made it easier for contemporary efforts at further streamlining the writing system with simplified characters and pinyin in an ongoing effort to make the Chinese language easier to learn, useful to employ, and aesthetically appealing, longing for the past. As

you begin to practice character writing in the next chapter, keep in mind the amazing history of the development of Chinese characters, and the many stages of stylistic growth characters have gone through to get to this moment — the moment when you, the newest student of Chinese character writing, will be able to benefit from the final stage of stylistic growth: Regular script.

The Four Treasures of Chinese Calligraphy

We now turn to the instruments used by the ancients (and not-so-ancients) to create works of art, Chinese calligraphy, and even just a letter to a friend. Okay, so it may have taken that letter several months to get to its intended recipient, but by the time it arrived, the person on the other end would be able to keep it forever (as opposed to accidentally deleting it from an Inbox).

Any calligrapher worth his salt will have the **wénfáng sìbǎo** 文房四寶 (one fahng suh baow) — the four essential tools of a scholar:

- » Writing brush **bǐ** (笔) (**bee**)
- » Ink **mò** (墨) (**maw**)
- » Paper **zhǐ** (纸) (**jir**)
- » Ink stone **yàn** (砚) (**yeah-n**)

These tools are known collectively as the *Four Treasures of the Study*, or the *Four Treasures of the Scholar's Studio*. They were used by scholar-officials not only for ordinary communication or official decrees but also, and more importantly, to express their thoughts and feelings through calligraphy.

These four tools are considered treasures because calligraphy materials have always been held in the highest regard. They are the same materials Chinese painters use as well, which leads me to the next point.

In China, painting has actually been seen as secondary to calligraphy as a visual art. If you look at a traditional Chinese painting, you will also see a poem or other inscription invariably written, if ever so tiny, in one or another corner. It is the quality of the poetry and the style of calligraphy with which it

was written that adds value to the painting.

The Four Treasures make it possible for the calligrapher (and the painter) to bring the thoughts, feelings, and, some would go so far as to say, the very soul of the Chinese people to life.

Even though the Four Treasures were determined centuries ago, they remain the key elements needed to practice Chinese calligraphy today. So even though this book teaches you how to write characters with a plain old pen and paper, if you want to write calligraphy, you will need the very same Four Treasures that the ancients used.

And now, without further ado, a closer look at The Four Treasures.

Writing brush

The calligraphy brush was as precious and sought-after a commodity by scribes and scholars in ancient China as the latest iPhone is today. It fast became the most efficient way for emperors and poets alike to get their proclamations heard and their literature read. (Best of all, they didn't have to worry about being hacked in cyberspace.)

The calligraphy brush itself dates back at least 3,000 years. The Chinese word for it, then and now, is 毛笔, which translates into *hair pen* or *writing utensil made of hair* because the tip used for writing was made of wolf, rabbit, or sheep hair.

The tube, inside of which rest the hairs of the brush, is typically made of bamboo, and there is usually a hook at the top of the brush so that you can hang it up.

In general, calligraphy brushes can be divided into three categories:

- » **Soft brushes** made of sheep hair absorb water really well and are excellent for writing large characters. They're not only cheap but also versatile enough to write Seal script, Clerical script, or Running script, which run the gamut from angular to free form. The softer the brush, the more rounded the character it creates.
- » **Hard brushes** are often made of rabbit or even wild horse hair and are more expensive than the soft sheep haired brush. These brushes are particularly well suited to control how thick the strokes are. The stiffer the

brush, the bolder the characters.

» **Mixed hair brushes**, made up of two or more kinds of animal hair, create strokes that are somewhere in between soft and stiff, depending on which hairs are used.

The type of hair on a brush is crucial to creating just the right kind of stroke. Brushes can be considered to have their own personality, so it is important to know in advance what kind of characters you plan on writing.

Writing brushes range from small and thin to huge and thick, depending on the type and size of calligraphy you wish to create.

Ink

Nine times out of ten, every time a calligraphy brush is dipped into ink, it is being dipped into minerals mixed with glutinous rice and the ashes of perfumed incense. Today, calligraphers might also use liquid ink.

There is also something called *lampblack* — material composed of very small particles of carbon, which comes from soot. It's been used since the dawn of time to make ink.

When mixed with water and glue, these ingredients are pressed into molds, and when those molds harden, sticks of ink are created, ready to be ground up in the ink stone (discussed later in this section). The beauty of all of this for calligraphers is that water can be added to the ink stone so that the calligraphers can create whatever thickness of ink and density of pigment they would like for the particular characters they have in mind. Quite different from the more limited liquid ink, which is what it is, and can't be changed.

Rice paper

Paper is widely considered to be one of China's major technological achievements, and it has often been viewed as its greatest contribution to the world. It is said that Cai Lun 蔡伦 (pronounced Tsye Loon), a eunuch and minister to an emperor during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), was the one to invent paper.



REMEMBER Rice paper is the best kind of paper to use when writing calligraphy because of the way it absorbs ink. It can create a blurry quality, which is particularly well suited for watercolor paintings in addition to calligraphy. It is made by hand and is both soft and tough — perfect for all types of creative brush strokes the calligrapher might want to draw.

Fun fact: The term “rice paper” is a misnomer because it is actually made with bamboo, hemp fiber, and the bark of mulberry trees. These basic materials were actually inexpensive to produce and easy to find, so it is no wonder that the art of calligraphy was able to flourish and survive throughout the centuries.

Ink stone

An ink stone is a circular or rectangular vessel with a shallow recess in the middle that holds the ink to be used by the calligrapher. The ink stone is where the ink is ground up and mixed with water.

Ink stones are artistic in and of themselves, and they are held dear to those who own them. Ink stones that were owned by emperors are rare and increasingly sought after by collectors. Just like with the size of calligraphy brushes, which could be large enough to paint with on the ground, ink stones can be very small or, as in the case of the biggest ink stone ever found, can weigh as much as two tons!

In addition to ornate carvings inscribed on the lids, names of the calligraphers who owned them, and even poetry, were also inscribed. These were considered almost a sacrosanct part of the Four Treasures, kept in the calligrapher’s study. The same poetry and art are inscribed on the lids today. There was an almost Zen-like, meditative quality inherent in the act of rubbing the ink stick in circular motions on the ink stone. The mere act of rubbing also creates a sound that depends on the elements of which the ink stone is made — something akin to a Tibetan prayer bowl.



REMEMBER

HOW TO USE A CALLIGRAPHY BRUSH

Before you begin to use a calligraphy brush, you must first soak it in water, taking it out only when it's soft. Then use your ring finger, middle finger, and thumb to hold the brush.

Right about now, you will also want to start preparing the ink and ink stone, into which the brush will be ceremoniously dipped before putting brush to paper. You do this by putting the stick of hard ink in water and grinding it in concentric circles against the ink stone until it becomes soft enough to dip your writing brush in, and come out with something that will stick, not drip, on the rice paper.

As you begin to write, tilt the brush with the fingers that are holding the brush — not with your whole hand. It's an intricate, delicate balance that must be struck with the proverbial hand-eye coordination, but the quality of the characters you create depend on it.

Each time you dip the brush in the ink, do so swiftly and with great care. Only immerse about one-third of the brush in the ink and take it out quickly.

Always keep your elbow above the table when practicing with a calligraphy brush. That way it will be easier (and difficult to forget) for you to use only your fingers, and not the rest of your hand, to create each character.

If you hold the brush high, you will be able to write thinner, softer strokes. If you hold it closer to the bristles, you can create more solid, well defined strokes.

Tools and Techniques for the Modern-Day Calligrapher (or Writer)

Whether in the 1st century or the 21st century, those practicing calligraphy still use the exact same Four Treasures. In this workbook, though, you need only use a regular, modern pen to practice writing your newly learned Chinese characters.



TIP

Since it will still be a wonderful, artistic, and awe-inspiring experience, I suggest you celebrate the moment by using a special pen — any pen that is special to you. It will still be a regular pen, though, so don't stress if you can't find just the right kind of special pen. Even a regular pen that you use every day will become your own special pen if

you use it just for practicing writing Chinese characters.

As for paper, you will see in [Chapter 4](#) the type of special paper used when you are first beginning to learn how to write Chinese characters. (It's kind of like the paper you might remember when you first learned to write numbers and letters in kindergarten and first grade.)

[Chapter 2](#) introduced you to the different components that comprise composite characters (turn back to that chapter if you skipped it or need a refresher):

Upper and lower parts: 思

Left and right parts: 如

Inner and outer parts: 网

Upper, central, and lower parts: 莫

Left, central, and right parts: 树

Well, you're going to put this knowledge to good use as you begin to use the kind of practice paper designed specifically for use in practicing how to write Chinese characters. On this special character practice paper, you will practice writing each character inside one, and only one, square, being careful to keep the various components symmetrical.



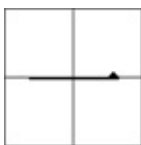
REMEMBER Here are some things you want to pay attention to as you practice writing Chinese characters:

- » Each section of the square in which your character will be written
- » Even distribution of the character so that the whole character looks symmetrical
- » The stroke order in which the character will be written

一 • one

yī

With just a flick of the wrist, you've written the simplest of all the tens of thousands of Chinese characters out there — the number one. Add the character **yuè** 月 after it, and you have January: **yī yuè** 一月, the *first month*.

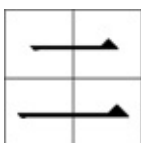


Radical: 一

→															

二 • two

èr



Radical: 二

→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→
→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→

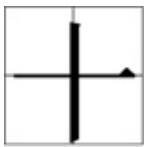
If you thought number one was easy, number two is even easier — the logical extension of one additional line. Add the character **yuè** 月 after it, and you have February: **èr yuè** 二月, the *second month*. Put a **shí** 十 (*ten*), in front of it, and it becomes twelve (*ten plus two*). Flip the numbers around, with a two in front of the ten, and you have **èr shí** 二十 (*twenty*). In Chinese, the

numbers add up. Literally.

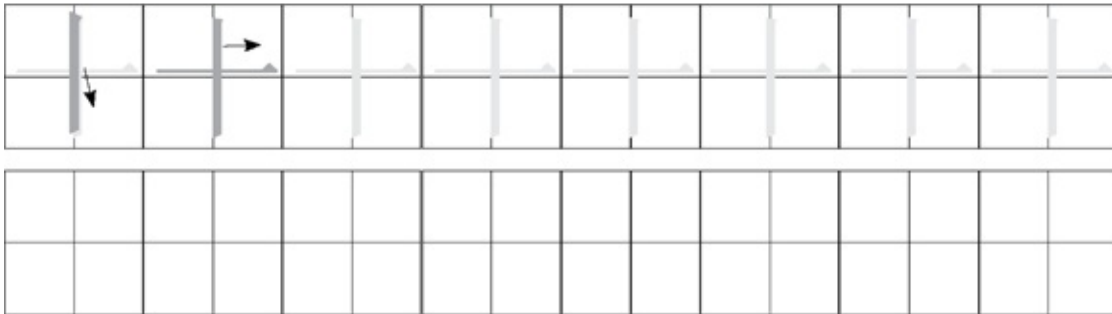
十 • ten

shí

Ten is the pivotal number in Chinese. Put it in front of any number from one to nine, and you have the “teen’s” — eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and so on. Put it **after** any number from one to nine, and you have twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, and so on. Add the character **fēn** 分 after it, **shí fēn** 十分, and you have “fully” because ten parts make a whole.



Radical: 十



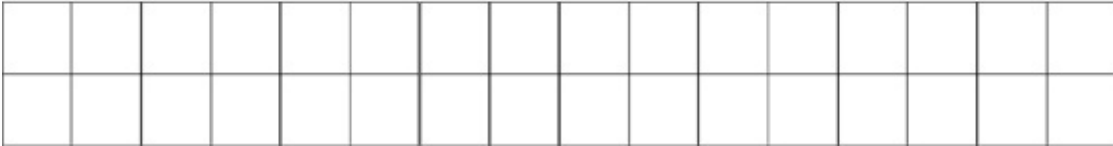
七 • seven

qī

Just like the numbers one and two, the number seven in front of the character **yuè** 月 means July — the *seventh month*.



Radical: 一



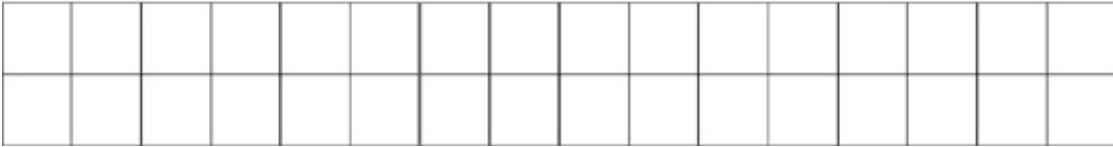
八 • eight

bā

A homonym for the character **fā** 发 — part of the word meaning *to become wealthy and prosper* — the number eight is auspicious indeed. It's no wonder the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was scheduled for August 8, 2008 (the eighth day of the eighth month) at 8:00 p.m.



Radical: 八



九 • nine

jiǔ

Despite the way it looks, the character **jiǔ** 九 is composed of only two strokes

of the writing brush — the first from top to bottom on a diagonal, and the second a horizontal line which then swoops down, ending in a hook.



Radical: 丿



• classifier

In and of itself, **gè** 个 is not a word. Rather, it's a classifier — something akin to a “gaggle” of geese, or a “herd” of sheep. Sandwiched in between a number and a noun, it “classifies” the general meaning of the noun that comes after it.

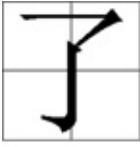


Radical: 人

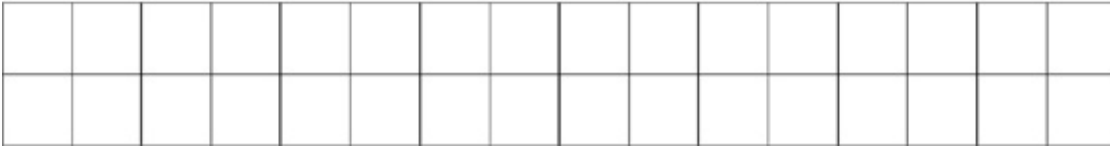


• final particle

A final particle indicating the completion of an action or a change in the state of something, “le” always comes right after a verb. **Tā lái le.** (他/她 来了.) means *He came*. Without the “le” at the end, it might mean *He is coming* or *He will come*, or some other tense.



Radical: 丿



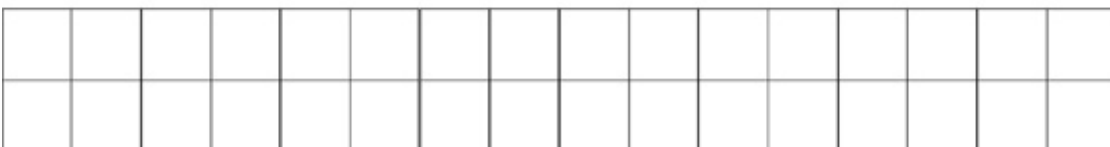
rén

• person

Rén 人 is one of the most important — and easiest — characters to learn. As a pictograph, it resembles a person standing upright, walking forward, the upside down “v” being the two legs walking. Add the character for mouth: **kǒu** 口 after it: **rén kǒu** 人口, and you have *population*: the number of mouths there are to feed.



Radical: 人



门 • door
mén

The traditional character for door looked like a swinging door from an old Western movie: 𠔿. It is found in **dà mén** 大门 (*big door* [main entrance]), or **mén kǒu** 门口 (*mouth of the door* [doorway]).

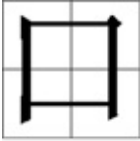
𠔿

Radical: 𠔿

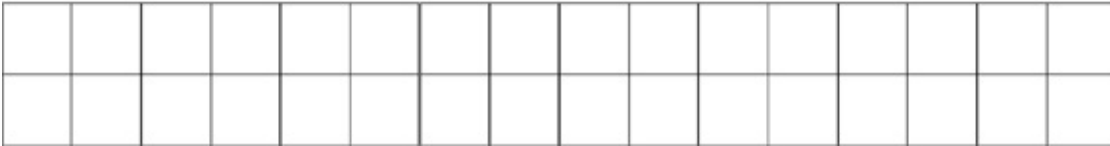


口 • mouth
kǒu


The original, ancient oracle bone character for mouth looked like an open mouth with two teeth from the top and two from the bottom poking out. After all the teeth have fallen out, you're left with **kǒu** 口. If you combine 口 with **hé** 禾, meaning *grain*, you get 和 (*peace*). For an agrarian economy, when there is enough grain for people's mouths, there is peace in the land.



Radical: 口

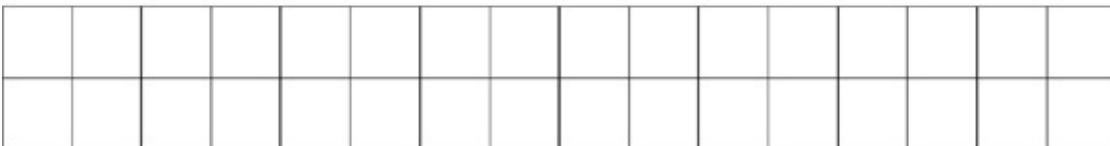


女 • female
nǚ

Originally written as a subservient figure kneeling: , the modern-day character for female can more easily be seen simply as swaying hips, underneath the horizontal line of a torso.



Radical: 女



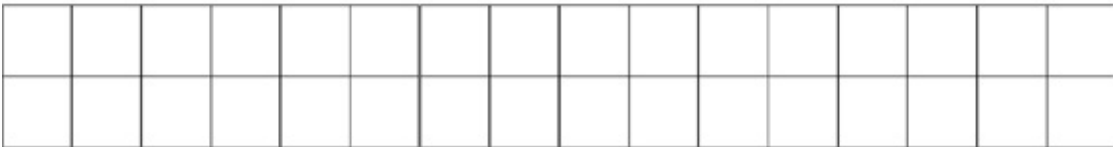
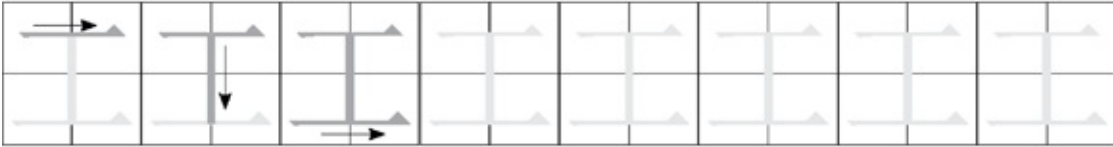
工 • work
gōng

The ancient writing of this character represented an agricultural tool, indicating work. With the character **rén** 人, meaning *person* after it, it

becomes **gōngrén** 工人 — *worker*.

工

Radical: 工



大 • big

dà

The character 大 depicts a man standing upright with outstretched arms. He looks really big this way.

大

Radical: 大



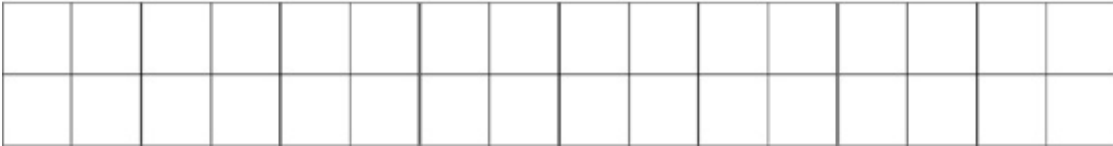
小 • small

xiǎo

When the character for *big*, **dà** 大, is combined with the character for *small*, **xiǎo** 小, you have the word for “size” — *big/small*: **dà xiǎo** 大小, get it?



Radical: 小



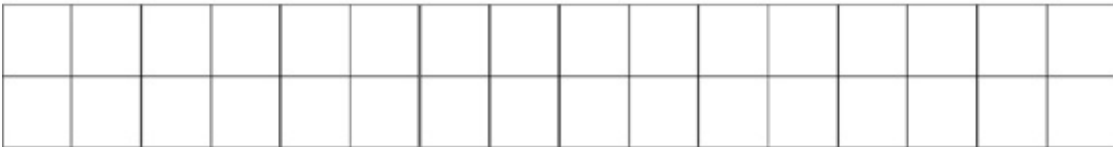
三 • three

sān

It's as easy as one, two, three: **yī**, **èr**, **sān** 一, 二, 三. The characters for the first three numbers are the simplest to remember. Just start with one horizontal line and keep adding another line until you get to three. After that, all bets are off.



Radical: 一



山 • mountain

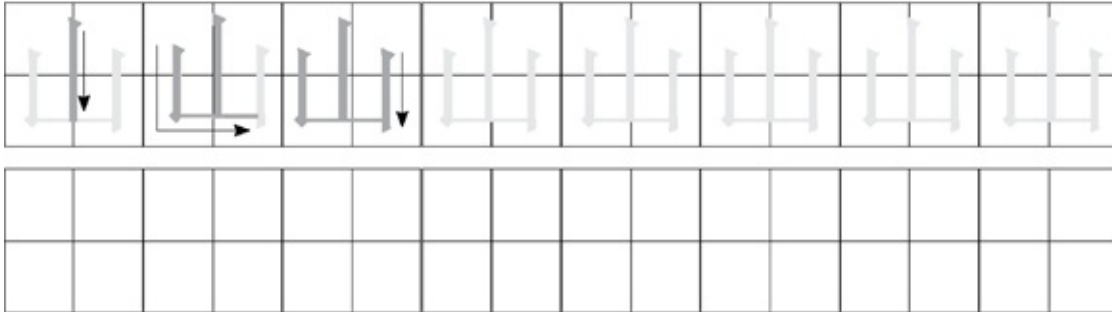
shān

One of the more interesting pictographs is **shān** 山, looking almost just like what it is: a mountain. When you combine it with the character for *fire*, **huǒ**

火, you have volcano: **huǒ shān** 火山 (literally, *fire mountain*).

山

Radical: 山



上 • above; on top of

shàng

Imagine the horizon. Then look straight up to the sky as the sun comes up. Just take one horizontal line, add a vertical line above it, and you're on top of the world. (Or at least somewhere on top.)

上

Radical: 一



下 • below

xià

As with **shàng** 上 (on the preceding page), this character also shows a

horizon, but this time the vertical line points down beneath the earth, rather than up to the sky. Hence, the term for *below*.

Radical: 一



也 • also
yě

Why the original picture of a snake was used to represent the word “[also](#),” we’ll never know, but there you have it.

Radical: 乙



子 • child
zi

This character shows the image of a little baby with outstretched arms, but

with its legs still swaddled in a blanket. Cute, no?

子

Radical: 子

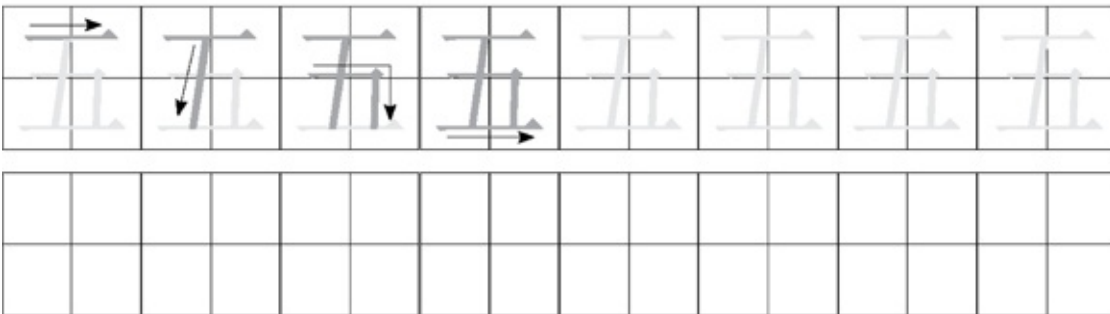


五 • five
wǔ

The number five is particularly beloved by Chinese gourmands. Put the character **wèi** 味, meaning *taste*, after it, and you have **wǔ wèi** 五味 (the *five flavors*) — salty, spicy, sour, sweet, and bitter — which together promote health and harmony.

五

Radical: 二



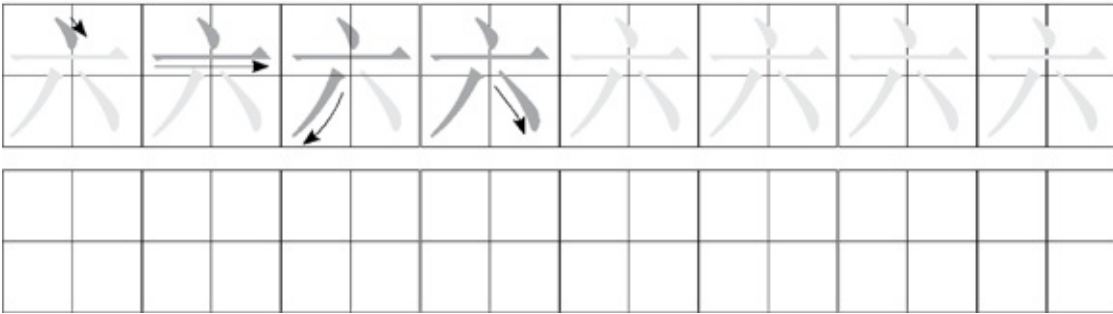
六 • six
liù

While the number six originally looked like a hut, it can be combined with

the character for ten in one direction, **liù shí** 六十, and mean sixty (*six times ten*), or in the other direction, **shí liù** 十六 (*ten plus six*) and mean sixteen.



Radical: 八

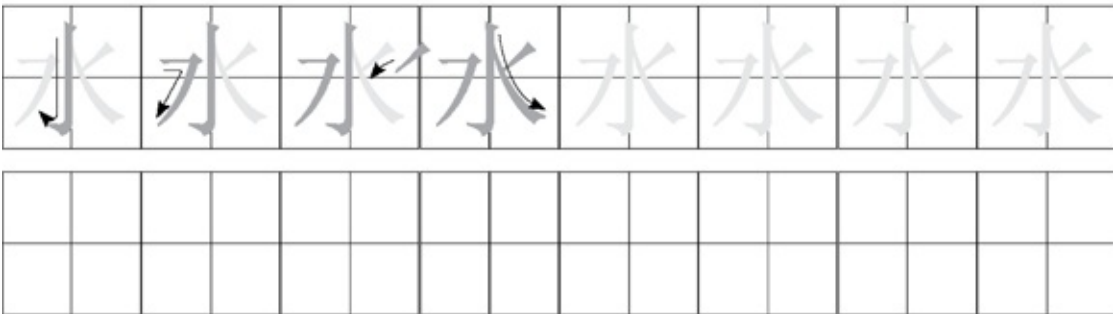


水 • water
shuǐ

Depicting flowing water, this character can also be reduced to three dots 氵 on the left-hand side of other characters, indicating that the word has something to do with water or liquid, such as *river*, **hé** 河, or *ocean*, **hǎiyáng** 海洋.



Radical: 水

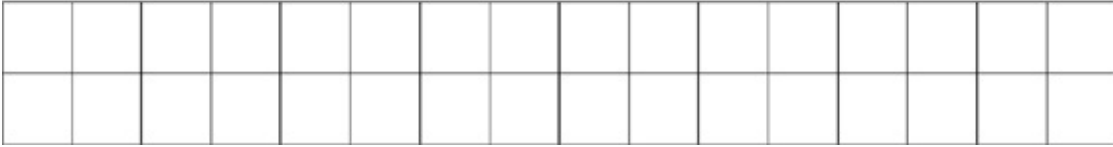
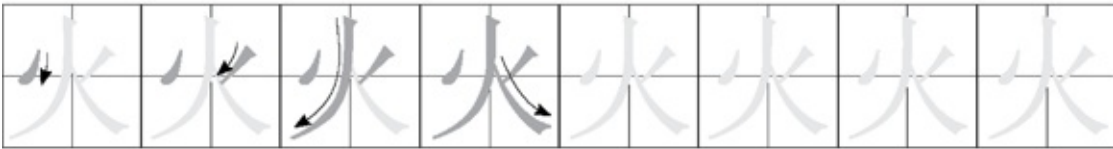


火 • fire
huǒ

Imagine two embers flying off on either side of a flame, and you have the character for fire. Chinese being such an ancient language, if you put it in front of the character meaning *vehicle*, **chē** 车, and you have a *fire vehicle*, **huǒ chē** 火车, otherwise known as a *train*.

火

Radical: 火



手

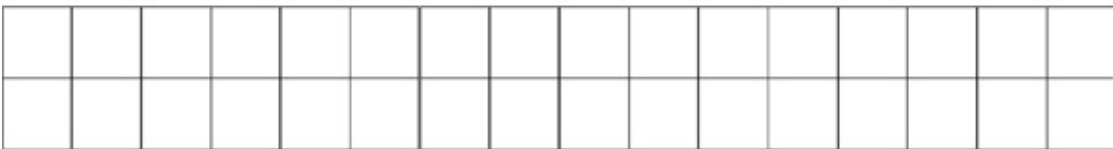
shǒu

- hand

This character can go from ancient to modern in a nanosecond. When sandwiched in between **kōng** 空 (*empty*) and **dào** 道 (*the Way*), you have **kōngshǒudào** 空手道 (*karate*), *the Way of the Empty Hand*. Put it in front of **jī** 机 (*machine*) and voilà, it's a cellphone: **shǒu jī** 手机 (*handheld device*).

手

Radical: 手



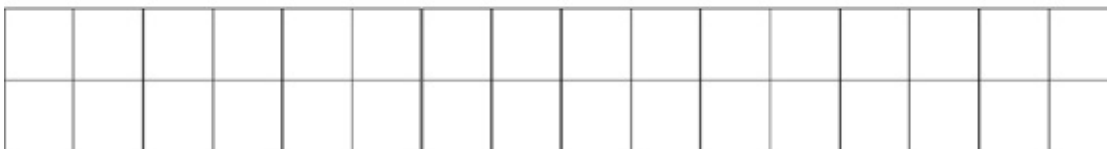
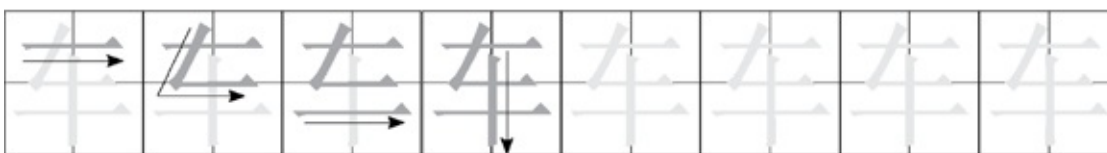
车 • vehicle

chē

From **huǒchē** 火车 (*fire vehicle* [train]) to **qìchē** 汽车 (*vapor vehicle* [car]) to **chūzū chē** 出租车 (*hire vehicle* [taxi]), the character 车 really gets around.



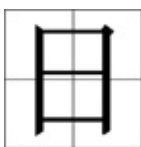
Radical: 车



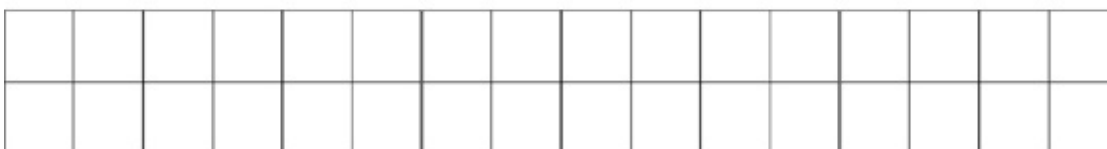
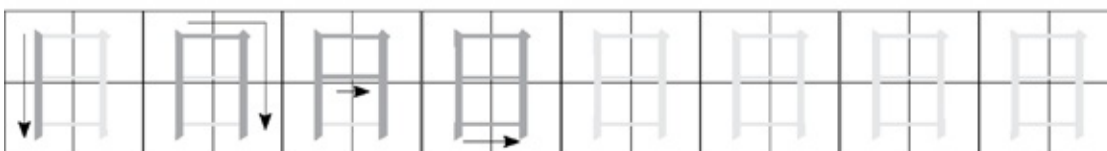
日 • sun

rì

What could be brighter than the sun? How about the sun and the *moon*, **yuè** 月, together? 日+月=明, otherwise known as bright.

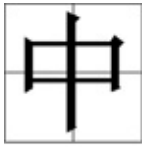


Radical: 日

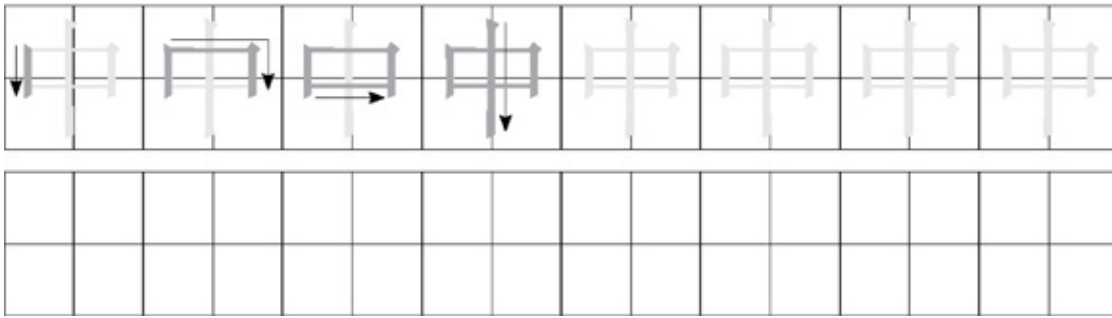


中 • middle
zhōng

This character is crucial for China. In fact, it's the main part of the word for the country itself: **Zhōngguó** 中国 (*China*). Since ancient times, China has for centuries called itself the Middle Kingdom, and has the characters to prove it.



Radical: 丨



天 • day; heaven
tiān

A combination of **dà** 大 (*great, or large*) and **yī** 一 (*one*), this character represents the great “*oneness*,” or *Heaven*. Put **xià** 下 (*underneath*) after **tiān** 天, and you have **tiān xià** 天下 (*earth, or the world*), which is under the Heavens.

天

Radical: 大

天 天 天 天 天 天 天 天

文 • literature; writing

wén

This character has many meanings, either relating to *literature*, **wénxué** 文学; *culture*, **wénhuà** 文化; or *civilization*, **wénmíng** 文明.

文

Radical: 文

文 文 文 文 文 文 文 文

心 • heart

xīn

The study of what is inside the *heart* — **xīnlǐ xué** 心里学 — is the Chinese term for *psychology*. It has many different meanings depending on what other character it is combined with, and they each get to the heart of the matter.



Radical: 心



月

 • moon; month
yuè

Originally in the shape of a moon, then morphing to the current character, the moon can be found in **yuè sè** 月色 (*moonlight* ([literally, the *color of the moon*])). Names of each month also contain the character “moon,” and appear numerically: **yī yuè** 一月 (*January*) being the first month.



Radical: 月



书

 • book
shū

This character can mean *book*, *a document*, or *to write*, among other things. The most beautiful of all arts connected to the intricacies of Chinese writing,

shūfǎ 书法 (*calligraphy*), translates as *the law of writing*.

书

Radical: 讠

书 书 书 书 书 书 书 书

开 • open

kāi

The ancient writing of this character meant opening the door with two hands. Nowadays, it is composed of 一 (*one*) and 扌 (*two hands*), indicating to open. Put it in front of **chē** 车 (*car*), and you get **kāi chē** 开车 (*to open a vehicle*), otherwise known as *to drive*.

开

Radical: 扌

开 开 开 开 开 开 开 开

少 • few

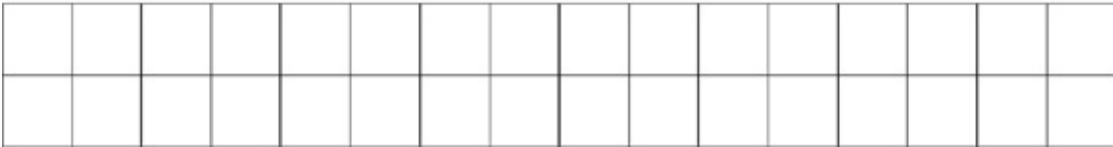
shǎo

Composed of the character for *small*, 小, and the single stroke 丿, this

character means *little*, or *few*. If you combine it with its opposite, **duō** 多 (*many*), you get 多少 — *many and few*. As with so many other words created by combining opposites, 多少 means “*How much?*” (*Is it many or few?*)



Radical: 小



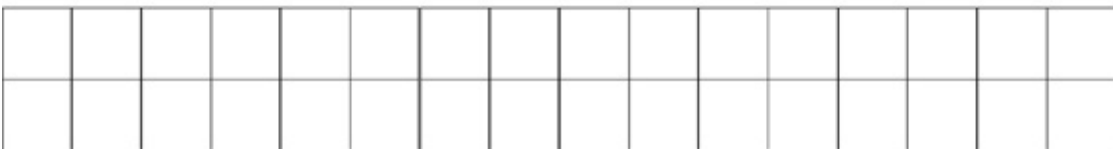
不 • no; negative prefix

bù

不 negates the verb that comes after it. It can mean *no*, *not*, or just something negative altogether. You can go from something positive, **hǎo** 好 (*good*), to something negative, **bù hǎo** 不好 (*not good*), in a split second.



Radical: 一



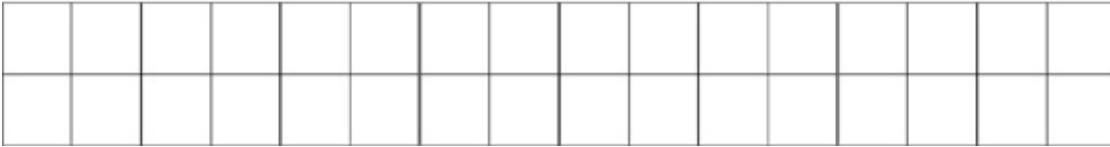
四 • four

sì

The character for the number *four* actually consists of five strokes of the writing brush. Unlike lucky number eight, the number four is a homonym for “death,” so it is to be avoided at all costs on phone numbers and email addresses, especially if you’re doing business with China.



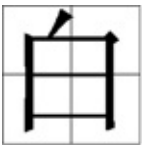
Radical: 囗



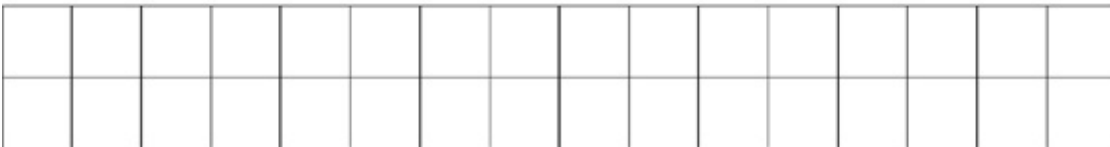
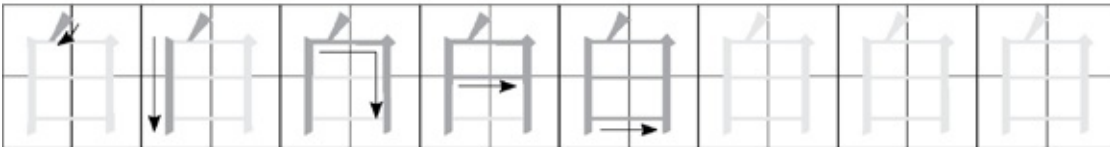
• white

bái

Composed of the stroke 丩 and the character **rì** 日 (*sun*), in addition to meaning white, it can be part of a two-character word and mean such things as *daytime*, **bái tiān** 白天, or *Caucasian*, **bái rén** 白人 (literally, *white person*).

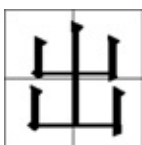


Radical: 白

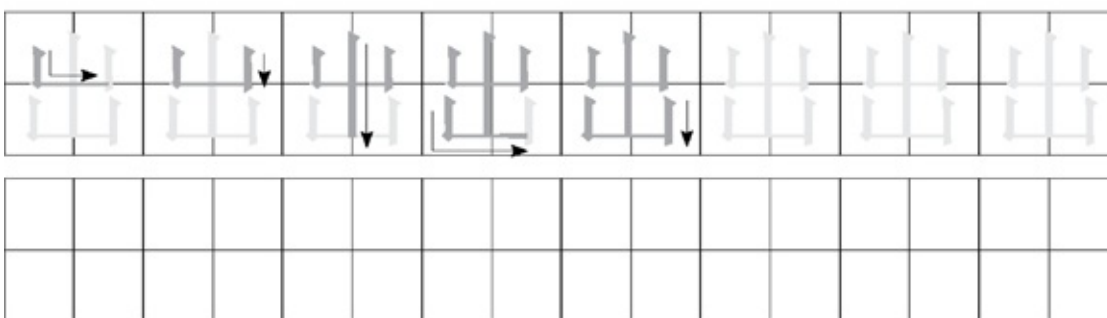


出 • go out
chū

If you look closely enough, you'll see the character for *mountain* 山 written twice — one on top of the other. If you find your way out of two mountain ranges, you're lucky. You got out unscathed.



Radical: 山



用 • use
yòng

Composed of the character for *moon*, **yuè** 月, and the vertical stroke |, the character **yòng** 用 means *to use*. Add the character **yǒu** 有 (*to have*) to it, and **yǒu yòng** 有用 means *to be useful* (literally, *to have some kind of use*). Put the negative **méi** 没 in front of both of those, and you have **méi yǒu yòng** 没有用 (*useless*).

用

Radical: 用

用 用 用 用 用 用 用 用

来 • come
lái

Composed of seven strokes — one of them meaning *one* 一, and the other six combining to mean *rice* 米, when combined with **lù** 路 (*street*), you get **lái lù** 来路 — literally *the street one comes from*, meaning *origins* or *antecedents*.

来

Radical: 木

来 来 来 来 来 来 来 来

里 • inside
lǐ

Composed of the characters **rì** 日 (*sun*) and **tǔ** 土 (*earth*), you can see that the character for *earth* goes up into the character for *sun* ... it's inside the sun. It means in, or inside.

里

Radical: 里

里 里 里 里 里 里 里 里

我 • I/me

wǒ

This character, which refers to each of us the minute we utter it, is composed of a hand 手 and a halberd 戈 — a combined spear and battle axe — as if to remind us that as early as the days when oracle bone writing first emerged, we needed to protect ourselves from any manner of threat.

我

Radical: 戈

我 我 我 我 我 我 我 我

他 • he/him

tā

Composed of **rén** 人 (*man*) and **yě** 也 (*also*), this character is pronounced the same as **tā** 她 (*she*) and **tā** 它 (*it*), but it is the only one among the three that has a radical meaning *person*. Make of this what you will.

他

Radical: 亻

他他他他他他他他

们

men

• plural

Composed of the characters **rén** 亻 (*man*) and 门 (*men*) (*door*), 们 acts as a suffix which indicates that something human is plural. Be sure to include the “man” radical, or it will just be a door.

们

Radical: 亻

们们们们们们们们

对

duì

• correct; towards

Composed of the characters **yòu** 又 (*again*) and **cùn** 寸 (*inch*), this character can mean *correct*, or it can act as the prepositions *for* or *towards*.

对

Radical: 寸

对 对 对 对 对 对 对

外 • outside

wài

The character 外, can be interpreted figuratively as well as literally. Terms for relatives on the female side of the family all begin with this character, since women are said to leave their parents' home to become part of their husband's family. They are "[outside](#)" the main family group.

外

Radical: 夕

外 外 外 外 外 外 外

右 • right (side)

yòu

Composed of the character **shǒu** 手 (*hand*) and **kǒu** 口 (*mouth*), 右 can also be combined with its opposite **zuǒ** 左 (*left*) to take on a new meaning:

approximately (neither left nor right).

右

Radical: 口

右 右 右 右 右 右 右

左

zuǒ

• left (side)

The polar opposite of **yòu** 右, **zuǒ** 左 consists of a hand, underneath of which is the character 工, meaning *work*.

左

Radical: 工

左 左 左 左 左 左 左

叫

jiào

• call

With a mouth radical, this character is all about talking. It is indispensable when you're about to introduce yourself: Wǒ jiào ... 我叫 (*My name is ...*).

叫

Radical: 口

叫 叫 叫 叫 叫 叫 叫 叫

去 • go
qù

This character is composed of the character 土 (*earth*), and part of a character meaning *private* 厶. It can be used in the sentence: Wǒ qù zhōngguó. 我去中国. (*I'm going to China.*)

去

Radical: 厶

去 去 去 去 去 去 去

写 • to write
xiě

Composed of the radical 冫 and the character yǔ 与, by itself it means *to write*. Put the character tīng 听 (*to listen*) in front of it, and you have tīng xiě 听写, meaning *dictation (to listen and then write)*.

写

Radical: 冫

写 写 写 写 写 写 写

她 • She/her

tā

Composed of the character meaning *female*, **nǚ** 女, and the character meaning *also*, **yě** 也, the word *she* is pronounced the same as the word for *he*, **tā** 他. The only way to tell them apart is by the written word.

她

Radical: 女

她 她 她 她 她 她 她

那 • that

nà

The ancient writing of this character represented a people with tribal poets living in far-off cities. Associated with the character 个, it forms **nàgè** 那个, meaning *that one*.

那

Radical: 阝

那 那 那 那 那 那 那

吃 • to eat

chī

Composed of the characters **kǒu** 口 (*mouth*) and **qǐ** 乞 (*to beg*), 吃 means *to eat*. Combine it with other characters, and it can mean **chīfàn** 吃饭 (*to eat [food]*), or **hǎo chī** 好吃 (*delicious*).

吃

Radical: 口

吃 吃 吃 吃 吃 吃 吃

关 • to close

guān

Composed of the radical 丿 and the character for sky, **tiān** 天, this means *to close*. You will find it in *close the door*,” **guānmén** 关门, and *to be concerned about*, **guānxīn** 关心.

关

Radical: 丷

关 关 关 关 关 关 关

回

huí

• to return

Composed of the characters **wéi** 围 (*enclosure*) and **kǒu** 口 (*mouth*), 回 looks like it is almost retuning to itself. In association with other characters, it is possible to create **huí jiā** 回家 (*to go home*) and **huí Zhōngguó** 回 中国 (*return to China*).

回

Radical: 口

回 回 回 回 回 回 回

买

mǎi

• to buy

Composed of the radical 乇 (a variant of the radical 乙) and the character for *head*, **tóu** 头, when combined with *east* and *west*, **mǎi dōngxī** 买东西, it

means *to buy* things.

买

Radical: 乙

买 买 买 买 买 买 买

有 • to have
yǒu

The old writing of this character represented a hand holding meat. So it is logical that it is composed of the characters 扌 (*hand*) and the *moon*, **yuè** 月. When you hold the moon in your hands, you have everything. The opposite, **méiyǒu** 没有, means *not to have* something ... or even *not to have* anything.

有

Radical: 月

有 有 有 有 有 有 有

在 • in, at, or on
zài

This is simply an aspect marker, indicating where something, someone, or some action is taking place, such as “He is *at* school.” **Tā zài xuéxiào.** 他在学校.

在

Radical: 土

在 在 在 在 在 在 在

问

wèn

• to ask

The mouth radical 口 is right in the middle of the character meaning *to ask*: **wèn** 问. The whole character (问) is also one part of compound characters such as **wèn hào** 问号, meaning *question mark*, and **wèn hǎo** 问好 (*to send one's regards*).

问

Radical: 门

问 问 问 问 问 问 问

多 • many/much

duō

This character is made up of the radical meaning *sunset* — two of them, in fact, one on top of the other. Paired with its opposite, **shǎo** 少 (*few*), it becomes a question: *How many?*

多

Radical: 夕

多	多	多	多	多	多	多		

好 • good

hǎo

This character is composed of a female on the left, and a child on the right. What could be better than a mother and her child? It is good.

好

Radical: 女

好	好	好	好	好	好	好		

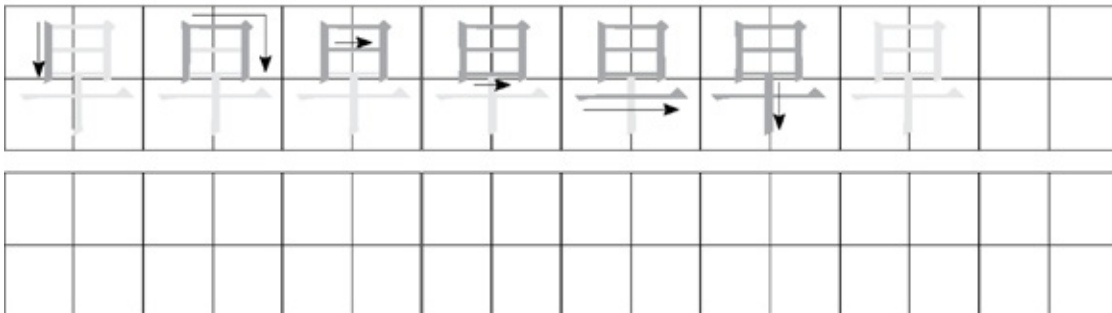
早 • morning/early

zǎo

The sun radical 日 is being pushed up by the number ten, **shí** 十, to form the word *early*. Said by itself, it can also mean *good morning*. Pair it with the word for food, **fàn** 饭, and it means *breakfast*: **zǎofàn** 早饭 — *the early meal*.

早

Radical: 日



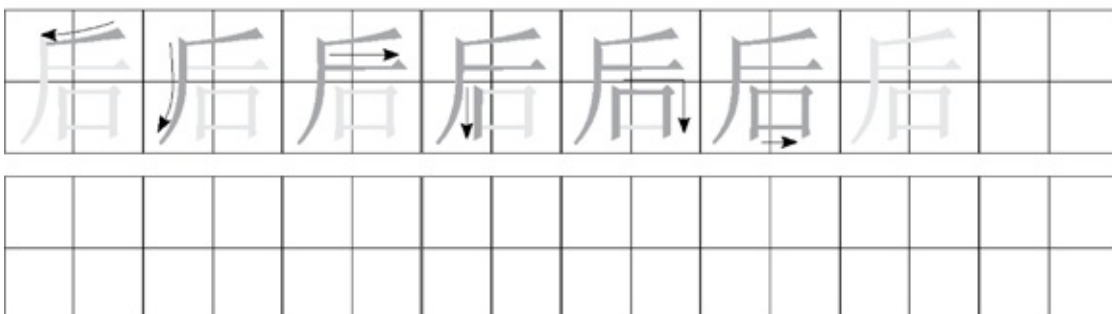
后 • after/in back of

hòu

Made up of a cliff, a number one 一, and a mouth 口, this character means *in back of*, or *after*. Put the character for day, **tiān** 天, after it, and you have **hòutiān** 后天 (*the day after tomorrow*).

后

Radical: 口



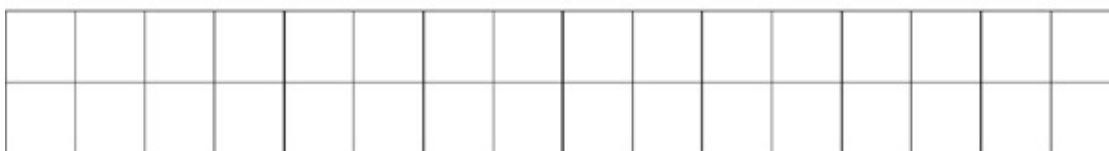
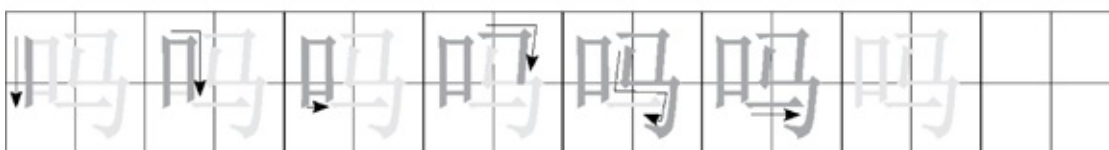
吗 • question particle

ma

Composed of the characters for *mouth*, **kǒu** 口, and *horse*, **mǎ** 马, it represents a final interrogative particle. Take any self-respecting sentence at all, add a 吗 at the end of it, and voilà, it becomes a question.



Radical: 口



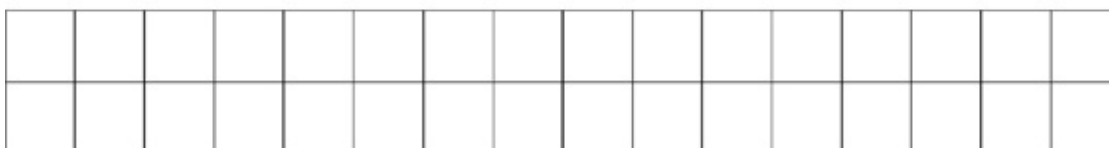
会 • to know how to do something

huì

Created with the character for *person*, **rén** 人, on top and *clouds*, **yún** 云, underneath, if a person can walk on top of clouds, then he really knows how to do something.



Radical: 人



你 • you
nǐ

The most basic of all questions contains this word: **Nǐ hǎo ma?** 你好吗?
(How are you?)

你

Radical: 亻

你你你你你你你

这 • this
zhè

Composed of the character **wén** 文 (*writing*) and the radical 辶 (*walking*), together they mean *this*. It is often followed by the classifier **ge** 个. **Zhège** 这个 (*this one*) and **zhè lǐ** 这里 (*here*) are two words you'll see and use over and over again.

这

Radical: 辶

这这这这这这这

还 • still/or/again

hái

Composed of the character meaning *no*, **bù** 不, and the radical for *walking* 辶, it can also mean *or* if combined with the character **yǒu** 有 (*to have*).

还

Radical: 辶

还 还 还 还 还 还 还

没 • negative particle

méi

Made up of one radical 氵 (*water*), and two characters **jǐ** 几 (*how many*) and **yòu** 又 (*still*), this character is actually a negative prefix used only right before the verb **yǒu** 有 (*to have*).

没

Radical: 氵

没 没 没 没 没 没 没

进 • enter; advance
jìn

You can *make progress*, **jìnbù** 进步, *invade* another country, **jìnfàn** 进犯, or even work in the *import-export* business, **jìn chūkǒu** 进出口, so long as the character 进 is a part of it.

进

Radical: 辶

进	进	进	进	进	进	进		

听 • to listen/hear
tīng

Composed of the characters **kǒu** 口 (*mouth*) and 斤 (*part of an axe*), this word is used in such phrases as **Wǒ tīng shuō** 我听说 (*I've heard that ...*) and **hǎotīng** 好听 (*good to hear*).

听

Radical: 口

听	听	听	听	听	听	听		

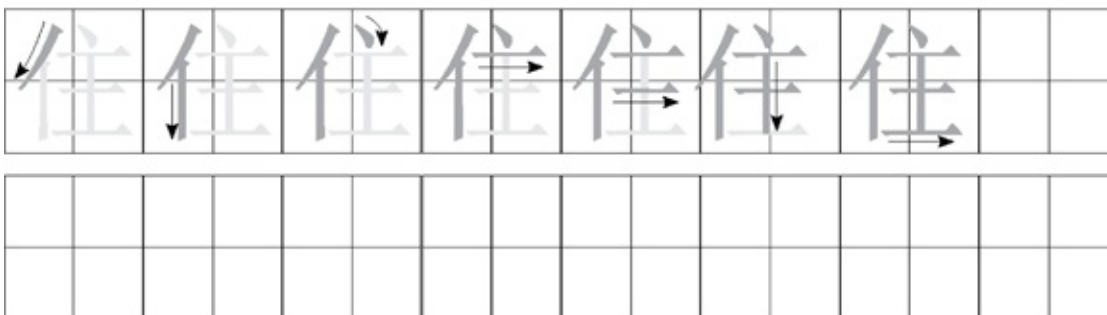
住 • to live (somewhere)

zhù

Composed of the radical 亻 (*person*) and the character **zhǔ** 主 (*host*), when a person is the master of his own home, he really lives there.

住

Radical: 亻



走 • to walk

zǒu

The ancient writing of this character represented a person walking, waving his arms. **Tā zǒu le.** 他走了. (*He left.*)

走

Radical: 走



作 • to do
zuò

Put a *man*, **rén** 人, together with a *utensil*, 亠, and he'll find a way to use it to do some kind of *work*, **gōngzuò** 工作.

作

Radical: 亠

作 作 作 作 作 作 作

坐 • to sit
zuò

It's really simple. Two people (人人) sitting on the earth (土) can only mean one thing: to sit down. It can be found in **zuòchē** 坐车 (*to sit in a car, or to take the car*) and **zuò xià** 坐下 (*sit down*).

坐

Radical: 土

坐 坐 坐 坐 坐 坐 坐

饭 • food

fàn

Combined with **zǎo** 早 (*early*), this means *breakfast*, **zǎo fàn** 早饭 — the early meal. Combined with **wǎn** 晚 (*late*), it means dinner, **wǎn fàn** 晚饭 — the late meal.

饭

Radical: 饣

饭饭饭饭饭饭饭

男 • man/male

nán

China has been an agricultural society for close to a thousand years. Men were the ones with the kind of **lì** 力 (*strength*) to till the **tián** 田 (*fields*), divided into quadrants. Put the 田 on top of the 力, and you've got the character for male.

男

Radical: 田

男 男 男 男 男 男 男

法 • method/law

fà

Composed of the radical for water and the character **qù** 去 (*to go*), the word *law* can be found in the name of France: **Fàguó** 法国 (*country of laws*).

法

Radical: 氵

法 法 法 法 法 法 法 法

法

到 • to arrive

dào

Composed of four characters - 一 (*one*), 厶 (*private*), 土 (*earth*) and 刂 (*knife*) — 到 means *to arrive*. You can **dàojiā** 到家 (*arrive home*) or even **dàolì** 倒立 (*stand upside down*) with this character.

到

Radical: 刂

到到到到到到到到

到

学

xué

• to study

The traditional form of this character is 學. The top part shows two hands, and the bottom is the character for child. The child is lifted up through study, guided by the hands of his parents and teachers.

学

Radical: 子

学学学学学学学学

学

的

de

• possessive particle

Composed of the characters for *white*, **bái** 白, and *spoon*, **sháo** 勺, this is a particle that makes something possessive. While **wǒ** 我 means *I* or *me*, **wǒ de** 我的 means *my* or *mine*.

的

Radical: 白

的 的 的 的 的 的 的 的 的

的

和 • and/peace

hé

You need to only look at this character to learn quite a bit about China's long dynastic history. Composed of **hé** 禾 (*grain*) on the left, and **kǒu** 口 (*mouth*) on the right, it shows that if there is enough grain to feed people's mouths, there will be no need to revolt, and there will be peace in the land.

和

Radical: 口

和 和 和 和 和 和 和 和

和

国 • country

guó

Yù 玉 (*jade*) — the most precious stone in China — is surrounded by an enclosure 口 to protect it. *One's country*, **guojiā** 国家, is something precious

worth protecting.

国

Radical: 口

国国国国国国国国

国

很 • very

hěn

The radical 彳 on the left means *to step with the left foot*, and the rest of the character, on the right, means *obstinate*. How these two came to mean *very* may remain one big mystery. Regardless, you can still say, **Wǒ hěn hǎo.** 我很好. (*I'm very well.*)

很

Radical: 彳

很很很很很很很很

很很

看 • to see

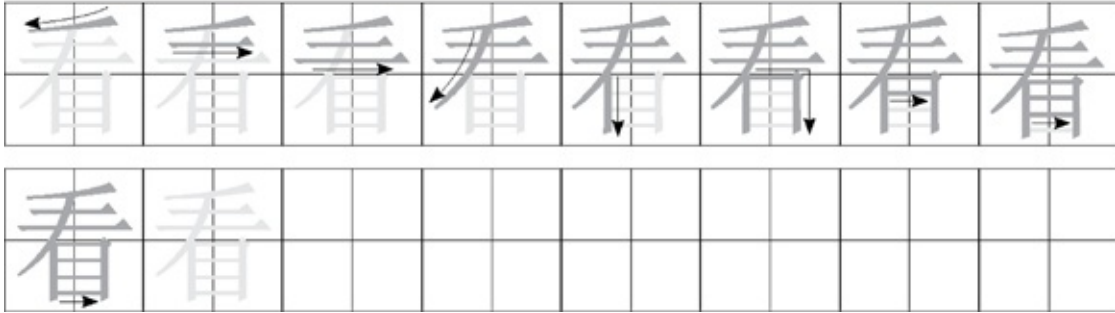
kàn

On the top is the radical for *hand*, **shǒu** 手, and beneath it the radical for *eye*,

mù 目. If you raise your hand to cover your eyes, you will block out the sun — so you can see.

看

Radical: 目



是 • to be
shì

With rì 日 (the *sun*) at the top, sure of its place in the universe, this character doesn't only mean *to be* — it's the only word you'll ever need to answer *yes* to any question. Right? **Shì!** 是!

是

Radical: 日



说 • to speak
shuō

The radical on the left, yán 讠 (*speech*), gives this character its full meaning.

Now you can say, **Wǒ huì shuō Zhōngwén.** 我会说中文. (*I can speak Chinese.*)

说

Radical: 讠

说说说说说说说说说
说说

语 • language
yǔ

The same radical for *to speak* is shared with the character meaning *language*, 语. It can be found in **yǔyán** 语言 (*language at large*), and of course as a part of **yǔfǎ** 语法 (*grammar*).

语

Radical: 讠

语语语语语语语语
语语

前 • before/in front
qián

前 can place something in the past or indicate that something will happen in

the future. Just **qiántiān** 前天 (*the day before yesterday*), in fact, the **qiánbèi** 前辈 (*older generation*) got together to discuss the prospects for their **qiántú** 前途 (*future*) **chīfàn qián** 吃饭前 (*before eating*).

前

Radical: 丷

前 前 前 前 前 前 前 前

前 前

要 • To want
yào

This word can be used simply, as in, Wǒ yào qù Zhōngguó. 我要去中国. (*I want to go to China.*), or it can be a dramatic way of saying that something is so bad you just want to die. **Wǒ è.** 我饿. (*I'm hungry.*) becomes **Wǒ è dé yàomìng!** 我饿得要命! (*I'm starving!*).

要

Radical: 西

要 要 要 要 要 要 要 要

要

家 • house/family

jiā

Put a **zhì** 豕 (*pig*) under a **mián** 宀 (*roof*), and you have a domesticated animal — one that lived with its owners at the dawn of Chinese civilization. It's been associated with the home and family ever since.

家

Radical: 宀



能 • can; to be able to do something

néng

This character evolved from a picture of a bear, consisting of something **sī** 厶 (*private*), a **yuè** 月 (*moon*) and two **bǐ** 匕 (*daggers*), one on top of the other. If you are a capable person, you are considered **nénggàn** 能干.

能

Radical: 月



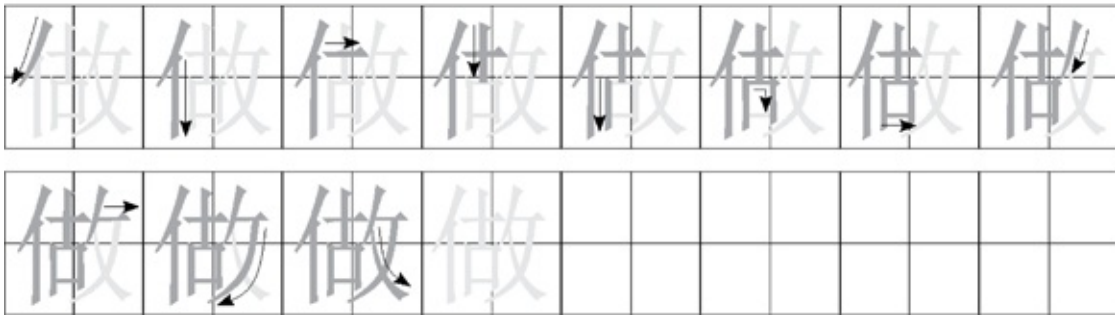
做 • to do/to make

zuò

Composed of the radical for *man*, **rén** 亻, and the character for *old*, **gǔ** 古, and a hand holding a stick, 攴, this character shows someone doing something with purpose, such as **zuò fàn** 做饭 (*cooking*), or **zuògōng** 做工 (*manual labor*).

做

Radical: 亻



晚 • evening/late

wǎn

Even though there's a sun radical (日) on the left, this character means evening rather than morning, because the word to the right means "to remove." So, without the sun, it is evening. You can talk about **wǎn fàn** 晚饭 (*dinner*), go to a **wǎnhuì** 晚会 (*evening party*), watch the glow of **wǎnxiá** 晚霞 (*sunset*) and then say **wǎn'ān** 晚安 (*goodnight*), all with the character 晚.

晚

Radical: 夕

晚晚晚晚晚晚晚晚
晚晚晚晚

喝 • to drink

hē

A **kǒu** 口 (*mouth*) is the key to this character, because you need it to **hē shuǐ** 喝水 (*drink water*) or **hē jiǔ** 喝酒 (*drink wine*). Just don't get **hē zuì** 喝醉 (*drunk*).

喝

Radical: 口

喝喝喝喝喝喝喝喝
喝喝喝喝喝

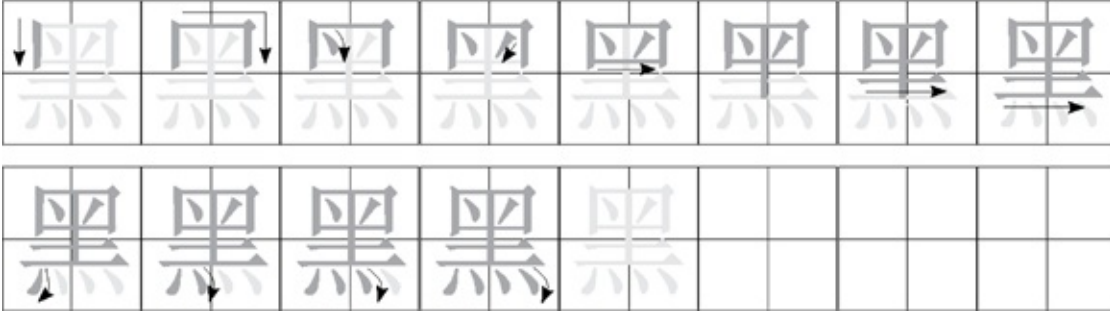
黑 • black

hēi

Black is both a character and a radical, all rolled into one. Combine it with 白 (*white*), and you have **hēi bái** 黑白 — *right and wrong*. And you know the difference.

黑

Radical: 黑



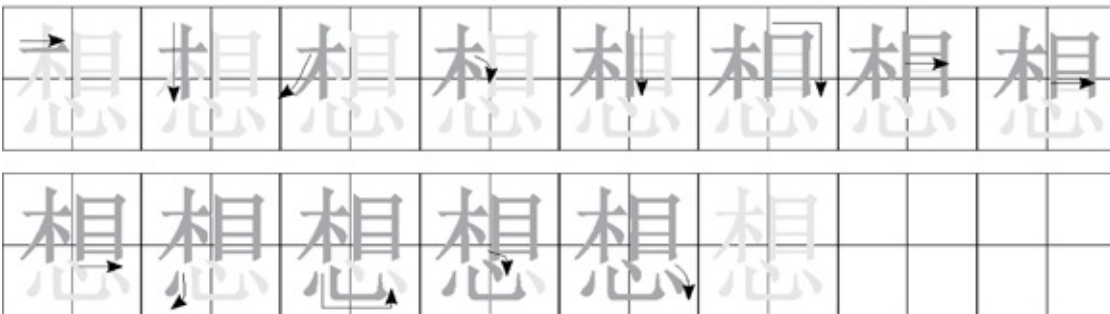
想 • to think/to want

xiǎng

A tree and an eye above a heart. These three radicals combined indicate that to be a good thinker, one must be as grounded as a tree, be able to see the world clearly, and have a good heart. All of these should guide people's thoughts and wishes.

想

Radical: 心



Appendix A

The 214 Chinese Radicals

In [Chapter 2](#), you learn all about radicals, those basic building blocks of Chinese characters that give you clues as to the meaning of a word — and one way by which you can look words up in a Chinese dictionary.

The following list has each and every radical known to man (and woman). If you can memorize all 214 of them, you win the prize. If not, and you're like the rest of us, just keep checking back here to see if you guessed the right radical for the character in question.

Radical No.	Radical	English	Pinyin	Stroke Count	Variant (Traditional)
1	一	one	yī	1	
2	丨	line	shù	1	
3	丶	dot	diǎn	1	
4	丿	slash	piě	1	㇏ ㇏
5	乙	second	yǐ	1	㇀ ㇀
6	乚	hook	gōu	1	
7	二	two	èr	2	
8	亠	lid	tóu	2	
9	人	person	rén	2	㇏
10	儿	legs	ér	2	
11	入	enter	rù	2	
12	八	eight	bā	2	㇏
13	冂	down box	jiǒng	2	
14	宀	cover	mì	2	
15	冫	ice	bīng	2	
16	几	table	jǐ, jǐ	2	
17	凵	open box	qǔ	2	
18	刀	knife	dāo	2	㇏
19	力	power	lì	2	

20	勺	wrap	bāo	2	
21	匕	ladle	bǐ	2	
22	匚	right open box	fāng	2	
23	匚	hiding enclosure	xǐ	2	
24	十	ten	shí	2	
25	卜	divination	bǔ	2	
26	卩	seal	jié	2	
27	厂	cliff	hàn	2	
28	厶	private	sī	2	
29	又	again	yòu	2	
30	口	mouth	kǒu	3	
31	凵	enclosure	wéi	3	
32	土	earth	tǔ	3	
33	士	scholar	shì	3	
34	夊	go	zhī	3	
35	夊	go slowly	suī	3	
36	夕	night	xī	3	
37	大	big	dà	3	
38	女	woman	nǚ	3	
39	子	child	zǐ	3	
40	宀	roof	gài	3	
41	寸	inch	cùn	3	
42	小	small	xiǎo	3	
43	尢	lame	yóu	3	尢
44	尸	corpse	shī	3	
45	艸	sprout	chè	3	
46	山	mountain	shān	3	
47	川	river	chuān	3	川 𣶒
48	工	work	gōng	3	
49	己	oneself	jǐ	3	
50	巾	towel	jīn	3	
51	干	dry	gān	3	

52	么	thread	yāo	3	
53	广	shelter	guǎng	3	
54	迈	stride	yǐn	3	
55	升	hands joined	gǒng	3	
56	弋	shoot with a bow	yì	3	
57	弓	bow (as in bows and arrows)	gōng	3	
58	ㄣ	snout	jì	3	亅
59	彡	hair	shān	3	
60	彳	step	chì	3	
61	心	heart	xīn	4	↑
62	戈	spear	gē	4	
63	户	door	hù	4	
64	手	hand	shǒu	4	扌
65	支	branch	zhī	4	
66	攴	rap	pū	4	攴
67	文	script	wén	4	
68	斗	dipper	dǒu	4	
69	斤	axe	jīn	4	
70	方	square	fāng	4	
71	无	not	wú	4	
72	日	sun	rì	4	
73	曰	say	yuē	4	
74	月	moon	yuè	4	
75	木	tree	mù	4	
76	欠	lack	qiàn	4	
77	止	stop	zhǐ	4	
78	歹	death	dǎi	4	
79	殳	weapon	shū	4	
80	母	mother	mǔ	4	毋
81	比	compare	bǐ	4	
82	毛	fur	máo	4	
83	氏	clan	shì	4	

84	气	steam	qì	4	
85	水	water	shuǐ	4	氺
86	火	fire	huǒ	4	灠
87	爪	claw	zhǎo	4	𠂇
88	父	father	fù	4	
89	爻	lines on a trigram	yáo	4	
90	月	half of a tree trunk	qiáng	4	
91	片	slice	piàn	4	
92	牙	tooth	yá	4	
93	牛	cow	niú	4	牛
94	𠂇	dog	quǎn	3	犬
95	玄	profound	xuán	5	
96	玉	jade	yù	5	王
97	瓜	melon	guā	5	
98	瓦	tile	wǎ	5	
99	甘	sweet	gān	5	
100	生	life	shēng	5	
101	用	use	yòng	5	
102	田	field	tián	5	
103	疋	cloth	pǐ	5	
104	疒	ill	bìng	5	
105	夊	foot steps	bō	5	
106	白	white	bái	5	
107	皮	skin	pí	5	
108	皿	dish	mǐn	5	
109	目	eye	mù	5	
110	矛	spear	máo	5	
111	矢	arrow	shǐ	5	
112	石	stone	shí	5	
113	示	spirit	shì	5	礻
114	肉	track	róu	4	
115	禾	grain	hé	5	

116	穴	cave	xuè	5	
117	立	stand	lì	5	
118	竹	bamboo	zhú	6	
119	米	rice	mǐ	6	
120	纟	silk	sī	3	糸
121	缶	jar	fǒu	6	
122	网	net	wǎng	6	𦉳
123	羊	sheep	yáng	6	
124	羽	feather	yǔ	6	
125	老	old	lǎo	6	
126	而	and	ér	6	
127	耒	plow	lěi	6	
128	耳	ear	ěr	6	
129	聿	brush	yù	6	
130	肉	meat	ròu	6	
131	臣	minister	chén	6	
132	自	oneself	zì	6	
133	至	arrive	zhì	6	
134	臼	mortar	jiù	6	
135	舌	tongue	shé	6	
136	舛	contrary	chuǎn	6	
137	舟	boat	zhōu	6	
138	艮	stillness	gèn	6	
139	色	color	sè	6	
140	艹	grass	cǎo	3	
141	虍	tiger	hǔ	6	
142	虫	insect	chóng	6	
143	血	blood	xuě	6	
144	行	walk	xíng	6	
145	衣	clothes	yī	6	衤
146	西	west	xī	6	西
147	见	see	jiàn	4	見

148	角	horn	jiǎo	7	
149	讠	speech	yán	2	言
150	谷	valley	gǔ	7	
151	豆	bean	dòu	7	
152	豕	pig	shǐ	7	
153	豸	badger	zhì	7	
154	贝	shell	bèi	4	貝
155	赤	red	chì	7	
156	走	walk	zǒu	7	
157	足	foot	zú	7	
158	身	body	shēn	7	
159	车	cart	chē	4	車
160	辛	bitter	xīn	7	
161	辰	morning	chén	7	
162	辶	walk	chuò	3	
163	邑	city	yì	7	阝
164	酉	wine	yǒu	7	
165	采	distinguish	biàn	7	
166	里	village	lǐ	7	
167	钅	metal	jīn	5	金
168	长	long	cháng	4	長
169	门	gate	mén	3	門
170	阜	mound	fù	8	阝
171	隶	slave	lì	8	
172	隹	short-tailed bird	zhuī	8	
173	雨	rain	yǔ	8	
174	青	blue	qīng	8	
175	非	wrong	fēi	8	
176	面	face	miàn	9	
177	革	leather	gé	9	
178	韦	soft leather	wěi	4	韋
179	韭	leek	jiǔ	9	

180	音	sound	yīn	9	
181	页	page	yè	6	頁
182	风	wind	fēng	4	風
183	飞	fly	fēi	4	飛
184	吃	eat	shí	3	食 食
185	首	head	shǒu	9	
186	香	fragrant	xiāng	9	
187	马	horse	mǎ	3	馬
188	骨	bone	gǔ	9	
189	高	high	gāo	10	
190	髟	long hair	biāo	10	
191	鬥	fight	dòu	10	
192	鬯	sacrificial wine	chàng	10	
193	鬲	cauldron	lì	10	
194	鬼	ghost	guǐ	9	
195	鱼	fish	yú	8	魚
196	鸟	bird	niǎo	5	鳥
197	卤	salty	lǔ	7	
198	鹿	deer	lù	11	
199	麦	wheat	mài	7	麥
200	麻	hemp	má	11	
201	黄	yellow	huáng	11	
202	黍	millet	shǔ	12	
203	黑	black	hēi	12	
204	黹	embroidery	zhǐ	12	
205	黾	frog	mǐn	8	黽
206	鼎	tripod	dǐng	12	
207	鼓	drum	gǔ	13	
208	鼠	rat	shǔ	13	
209	鼻	nose	bí	14	
210	齐	even	qí	6	齊
211	齿	tooth	chǐ	8	齒

212	龙	dragon	lóng	5	龍
213	龟	turtle	guī	7	龜
214	龠	flute	yuè	17	

Appendix B

Compound Words to Practice

Now that you've mastered 100 Chinese characters, it's time to see how some of them fit together like pieces of a puzzle to create even more words — words that, when broken down into their component parts, make perfect sense. This is especially true when you see the connection between ancient characters and modern concepts and inventions.

Add these new words to your vocabulary, and you'll be all the more able to express yourself to new (and old) Chinese friends. With this Appendix alone, you will have learned almost 30 more words — not bad for a newbie to written Chinese.

Population

Train

Size

人口

火车

大小

Don't have

没有

How much?

多少？

Be careful!

小心！

June

July

August

六月

七月

八月

Approximately

China

France

左右

中国

法 国

Nine

九

Nineteen

十九

Ninety

九十

We/Us

You (plural)

They/ Them

我们

你们

他 / 她们

Heaven and Earth

天 地

Before and After

前 后

My/Mine

Your/Yours

His

我的

你的

他的

Morning

早上

Evening

晚上

Don't want

不要

Appendix C

Sentences to Practice

Now that you've mastered not only 100 Chinese characters, but also an additional 30 or so Chinese words in Appendix [B](#), it's time to put them to good use by stringing them along. Literally. This appendix provides some key sentences that you can practice and show off to your friends.

Is this good?

That's great!

这个好吗？

太好了！

你有书吗？

我没有书。

How are you?

I'm fine.

你好吗？

很好。

Is that useful? It's very useful.

It's very useful.

那有用吗？ 很有用。

很有用。

Can you speak Chinese?

你会说中文吗？

I can speak French.

我会说法语。

This is too big.

That is too small.

这个太大。

那个太小。

I'm not American.

我不是美国人。

Does he drink water?

No, he doesn't drink water.

他喝水吗？

他不喝水。

This isn't mine.

It's his.

这个不是我的。是他的。

Appendix D

Blank Grids for Extra Practice

About the Author

Dr. Wendy Abraham has lived, studied, and worked in both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, directed Chinese language programs for American students, researched Oracle bones and bronze inscriptions (the origins of the Chinese writing system), and gathered oral histories of the oldest generation of Chinese Jewish descendants in Kaifeng — the subject of her doctoral dissertation. She has interpreted for high-level arts delegations and has taught Chinese language, literature, history, and culture at universities throughout the United States. An inveterate world traveler, Dr. Abraham has written widely and continues to lecture frequently on the subject of the Chinese Jews. Her interest in all things Chinese since the age of 3 continues unabated.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Pang Bingjun (1931-2017) – beloved teacher, prolific translator, true humanitarian, and survivor of the Cultural Revolution, whose life crossed paths with mine all those decades ago.

This book is also dedicated to the mighty Oracle Bone ... and to whoever the heck carved the first known Chinese character onto it thousands of years ago.

Acknowledgments

Now, as ever, thanks are due first to my family.

To my father George, who made it possible for me to attend Middlebury College in the Summer of '77. Little did he know he was sending me on a linguistic kamikaze mission, where memorizing hundreds of Chinese characters each week was the norm, and the CIA did their best recruiting every summer for budding counterintelligence linguists.

To my mother Marilyn, who never missed a beat sending weekly letters with news of the outside world, at a time when electricity and food were still being rationed in Beijing, and the de rigueur mode of transportation was the Flying Pigeon bicycle. Her letters got me through the dust storms of the Gobi Desert, tropical hurricanes in Taiwan, and surviving on nothing but caviar, Russian bread, and yak butter for five days with Finns on the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

And to my sister Susan, who was busy sculpting stone in Italy while I traipsed around the world.

To the teachers who had the greatest impact on my life and study of Chinese:

First and foremost, to Prof. Jonathan Chaves of George Washington University, whose hysterically funny and powerfully poignant lectures on everything from Tang Dynasty poetry to stories from the Cultural Revolution remain unparalleled. His courses gave us our first glimpse of the Chinese psyche and soul.

To Prof. Yu-Shih Chen, who pushed me to attend Middlebury College in the first place, and to Lionel Ts'ao, in whose course on Chinese Culture I came face to face with my very first Chinese character: 王 (king). Hunter College in the '70s was where it all began.

To Prof. Chao Lin of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, whose course on oracle bones and bronze inscriptions came with the biggest and heaviest textbook I've ever encountered, and had the honor of lugging to class every day. In between its covers were life size rubbings of actual ox scapulae and tortoise shells on which the most ancient of Chinese characters were carved.

And to the late, great Jesuit scholar, Father John Witek, of Georgetown University. A tougher, more demanding teacher of Chinese history you'll

never find – one whose passion for scholarship was exceeded only by the genuine care and mentoring he so freely gave his students.

Closer to home, deepest appreciation goes to Lindsay Lefevere, Wiley editor par excellence, who gave me the opportunity to write this new For Dummies book, and to production editor Magesh Elangovan, whose painstaking attention to detail no doubt made this book the best version of itself.

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